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## TO MARKET

BY CAROL COREN AND BETH FEEHAN

# FARMERS' MARKETS CONNECT FARMERS AND CONSUMERS

Looking to reduce your food miles and eat better? Visit one of more than 100 farmers' markets operating in the Garden State this summer and fall to purchase locally grown, seasonal farm fare. In addition to fruits and vegetables, many farmers' markets feature flowers, plants, bakery items, honey, farm-fresh eggs, artisan cheeses, meats, jams, sauces, pickles and other value-added products. Farmers' markets in New Jersey are increasing at a rate nearly three times that of the national average: In 2000, 40 farmers' markets were reported by the NJ Department of Agriculture; by 2007, there were 103 markets. Every county in the state now has at least one weekly community farmers' market, and more are being formed all the time.

To better understand this trend, in 2007 the Rutgers Food Innovation Center (FIC) (see "Building a Better Paradigm," *Edible Jersey*, Spring 2008) launched a study of NJ farmers' markets with support from the New Jersey Department of Agriculture and a USDA Rural Development grant. A research team including FIC, the Rutgers Food Policy Institute and Rutgers Cooperative Extension surveyed farmers and farmers' market sponsors to identify factors affecting market success. Defining a community farmers' market as "an indoor or outdoor market operating off the farm in which one or more agricultural producers sell products and items they have grown, harvested, prepared, crafted, baked or processed directly to consumers and other end users," the study found that markets play an important role in sustaining New Jersey's agricultural economy, but they need support from their local communities.

Garden State farmers like community markets because they can earn significantly better prices compared to customary wholesale channels. Farmers choose to participate in markets on the basis of location, consumer demographics and population density. They are also willing and eager to sell fresh items in economically challenged communities as well as in affluent suburban areas, in part because of supports available from USDA Food Voucher programs.

Farmers' markets operate under a variety of non-profit and for-profit management arrangements, with sponsors including Chambers of Commerce, service groups, parks and recreation departments and farmer cooperatives.



Photograph: Carole Topalian

Sponsors and market managers differentiate their markets on the basis of the types and sources of fresh foods being sold. They believe there is value in having farmers champion the foods they grow and encourage participating farmers to offer cooking tips and other information to customers. Farmers and market organizers agree that having a good market manager—someone with retail experience, outstanding people skills and a creative, enthusiastic attitude—is crucial to a market’s success.

Interestingly, farmers participating in the FIC study reported that attending farmers’ markets helps boost sales at their farm stands on other days of the week. “[Customers] learn about us when we sell at nearby markets and then seek us out to buy other items when they need and want them,” said one Central Jersey grower. Suburban and some urban markets see themselves as playing roles in reviving town centers and in creating a sense of community. Some markets operate in order to help local residents gain access to fresh, affordable whole foods not available in small, neighborhood convenience stores.

The appeal of farmers’ markets is growing for every type of consumer—young and old, singles and couples, tourists and local residents. Markets can serve as a temporary town common, attracting people from a wide range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Many markets feature special events, cooking demonstrations and entertainment to highlight seasonal produce and celebrate holidays. Farmers’ markets promote healthier eating and better nutrition, and they strengthen connections between urban, suburban and rural areas. Above all, they help keep the Garden State growing. 🌱

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## RUTGERS FOOD INNOVATION CENTER FARMERS’ MARKET STUDY: KEY FINDINGS

- Farmers who participate in community farmers’ markets like meeting and interacting with the public.
- For farmers, markets are hard work—market days can be 10 to 15 hours long.
- Earnings in an average day range from \$25 to thousands of dollars. The median revenue reported by farmers responding to the survey was \$863 per market day.
- Approximately one-third of the farmers completing the survey reported earning more than 50 percent of their total income from community farmers’ markets.
- Market managers see their work as a form of public service, helping preserve the small family farms that are raising foods for New Jersey tables.
- Markets rely on support from volunteers and local sponsors.
- Market managers are committed to highlighting locally grown products and ask their farmer-vendors to do the same.

*The FIC study surveyed 107 farmers participating in 2007 farmers’ markets; 51 completed surveys were received. Additional research involved interviews with 52 market managers; regional focus groups; and in-depth interviews of 15 farmers representing New Jersey’s most market-savvy vendors. Note that farmers selling at farmers’ markets represent a small subset of New Jersey’s total farming population.*



## RESOURCES

More information about New Jersey’s farmers’ markets, farm stands and the Rutgers Food Innovation Center can be found at:

- [njfarmmarkets.org](http://njfarmmarkets.org)
- [state.nj.us/jerseyfresh/searches/urban.htm](http://state.nj.us/jerseyfresh/searches/urban.htm)
- [state.nj.us/jerseyfresh/agritourismhome.htm](http://state.nj.us/jerseyfresh/agritourismhome.htm)
- [foodinnovation.rutgers.edu](http://foodinnovation.rutgers.edu).