

Impact

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Extension

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From garden surplus to community hub: Larimer County Farmers' Market

More than 35 years after opening, a market established and maintained by volunteers has increased awareness of small farms, grown sales for local foods and become a business incubator.

Issue

In the mid-1970s, finding a way to help backyard gardeners sell surplus produce was top priority for Larimer County Extension Colorado Master Gardeners (CMGs). This volunteer group approached their county Extension office with the idea of starting a local market. More than 35 years later, volunteers remain the backbone of the market—now one of the most successful volunteer-managed markets in the state.

Extension's Response

Larimer County Extension originally supported the market by funding the construction of a CMG information booth, establishing operating policies and managing finances. Larimer County CMGs organized and managed all other aspects of the market. Volunteers can now choose the market, from many options, as their payback for the horticulture training they receive.

Extension's fiscal and administrative oversight has increased as the market's season, vendor numbers and community interest has grown. Alison O'Connor, Larimer County Extension horticulture agent, has learned to sustainably increase and develop the market with help from Martha Sullins, CSU Extension regional agriculture and business management specialist. O'Connor says veteran market volunteers have also been an invaluable resource in directing market growth. In 2009, O'Connor hired a market assistant, Jean Reeder, to support continued expansion.

Today, the market is open Saturday mornings, in downtown Fort Collins, from May through October. Each week up to 75 vendors sell their products in the Larimer County Courthouse parking lot. Vendors primarily include local and direct market farmers, as well as value-added food producers and artisans. Both CMGs and Larimer County Extension Master Food Safety Advisors staff the Larimer County Extension information booth to answer customer questions about growing, using and preserving food.

Each week six CMG volunteers set up and take down the market under the direction of one 'Market Master' and one 'Assistant Market Master.' During the market, volunteers also assist customers purchasing Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits coupons or same-as-cash 'Market Bucks.' At the end of each market, volunteers collect taxes (city and state) and fees (six percent of sales) from vendors.

In 2006, market sales totaled \$222,307 and by 2013, market sales had nearly tripled to \$610,000.



The Bottom Line

Larimer County Extension and its Colorado Master Gardener volunteers have created a business asset that is a benefit to the community on many levels by:

- Serving as a small business incubator for direct market farmers
- Expanding regional food security and food safety
- Promoting agricultural literacy, local foods and community development

By the Numbers

- 2013 revenue: \$610,000
- Larimer County Extension's revenue: \$36,600
- Volunteer hours needed to run each market: 32
- 2013 Value of volunteer time: \$25.10/hour

Impact

As sponsor of the Larimer County Farmers' Market for more than three decades, Larimer County Extension and its Colorado Master Gardener volunteers have created a community asset that benefits the public on many levels. Specifically, the market:

- Serves as a small business incubator for direct market farmers.
 - Extension's Colorado Building Farmer's program (CBF) trains farmers how to create business plans and sustainably develop their operations. The market provides a low-risk retail venue for putting those plans in place. Nic Koontz, co-owner of Native Hill Farm with Katie Slota, took CBF in 2009 and 2010. The program taught him to make an informed and realistic business plan. "It has enabled us to move our business forward to a point where we are both full time farmers," says Koontz. Native Hill is one of the market's top selling producers.
 - Larimer County Extension offers affordable access to the local market place. Cost to apply: \$55. Cost to participate: weekly sales tax and percent of revenue fee. Financial accessibility promotes diverse participation, from new to well-established regional growers, and offers producers the chance to compete, grow and diversify.
- Expands food security and food safety.
 - The Larimer County Farmers' Market is the county's only summer market to accept electronic benefit transfers from SNAP. This expands access to the purchase of fresh, nutritious and locally-grown food, regardless of income level. Use of SNAP Benefits Coupons has increased over 80 percent since first introduced in 2007.
 - Most vendors donate unsold produce to the Larimer County Food Bank.
 - Immediately following the 2011 listeria outbreak, Master Food Safety Advisors gave customers and vendors responsive, current and science-based information.
- Promotes agricultural literacy, locally grown foods and community development.
 - The Larimer County Farmers' Market is a dynamic venue for educating the public. Vendors refer customers with gardening questions to CMG volunteers. Master Gardeners likewise refer customers back to vendors for pricing and food availability, as well as information on difficult-to-grow and unusual vegetables.
 - Mary Miller, market manager for Ela Family Farms, says market customers continue learning about local foods and agricultural production. "We give customers real time information and education about fruit, the farm, and the seasons, so that customers can expand their knowledge and awareness of what it takes to bring a piece of fruit to market," Miller says.
 - The market has become a community hub linking consumers and producers through business and social relationships.
 - Fees from vendor sales fund all of the market's operating costs and support the CMG program in Larimer County.

According to O'Connor, Larimer County recognizes these many benefits and is proud to partner with CSU Extension in providing this community asset. In 2012, the market expanded from 17 to 24 weeks. Farmers can now grow more food earlier in the year due to season extension measures. The Larimer County Farmers' Market is a volunteer project that exists due to CMG commitment. According to O'Connor, it would not exist without the CMGs.

"You see a little tent here, but there are hundreds of people behind it."

—Denise Culver, CMG volunteer on the Larimer County Extension market booth

"Having the Colorado Master Gardeners involved makes our program stronger because they have integral roles in keeping this market operational. In a way they are like 'employees'—extremely dedicated employees. Without them, there would be no market—we don't have the funds to run this market without the help of the volunteers."

—Alison O'Connor, Larimer County Extension horticulture agent

"The level of community that is present in the old town market is unprecedented. It isn't a bunch of discreet patrons; the market is a hub of community."

—Mary Miller, vendor, Ela Family Farms

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