Farmers markets are faring well during the pandemic

pressherald.com/2020/09/06/farmers-markets-are-faring-well-during-the-pandemic/

By Meredith GoadStaff Writer

September 6, 2020





Mike Perisho of Andrews Farm checks out a customer at the Yarmouth Farmers' Market in late August. The market has been busier than ever this summer, so farmers are extending it by a month into mid-November. *Brianna Soukup/Staff photographer*

Mike Perisho of Andrews Farm in Gardiner is used to hearing farmers market customers ask for tomatoes in June – wishful thinking. This year, though, thanks to investing in heat for one of his greenhouses, he was able to accommodate them with early tomatoes.

He had a good strawberry season, too, and these days his display at the Yarmouth Farmers' Community Market on Thursdays includes sweet peppers, eggplant, salad greens, melons and, yes, more tomatoes. There have been times this summer – a season of pandemic – that he has sold twice as many vegetables as he did last year; overall, he and other farmers at the market are seeing at least a 50 percent increase in sales. So they've asked to move the market into the open-air Bickford pavilion in mid-October in order to extend the market for a month; it has lighting so customers won't be shopping in the autumn darkness.

"The vendors have never really pushed to continue the season before," said Amy Sinclair, the market's manager, "and all of my key farmers said yes, so that tells me that business is good."



Beets, turnips, carrots and more from Andrews Farm at their stand at the Yarmouth Farmers' Market. *Brianna Soukup/Staff photographer*

Farmers who sell at markets around the state report similar scenarios. While they are seeing a lot of new faces across the mountains of zucchini and greens, in most cases the number of customers is down. But sales are up because shoppers are buying more meat

and produce from fewer vendors. Adding to the trend of bountiful sales is the fact that homebound shoppers are stocking their fridges and pantries more fully but may not be comfortable buying food at a grocery store.

“There are fewer customers, but each sale is higher because people are cooking more,” said Carolyn Snell of Snell Family Farm in Buxton, who manages the Portland Farmers’ Market.

One category of shopper has, however, been increasing. With unemployment high, farmers are seeing a big influx of new customers using SNAP benefits and Harvest Bucks, a program that doubles the amount SNAP beneficiaries can spend at the markets, according to Jimmy DiBiase, director of programs at the Maine Federation of Farmers’ Markets, which runs the Maine Harvest Bucks program.

In Maine, DiBiase said, SNAP spending at farmers markets has increased by 100 percent this year, a rise he attributes to more people enrolling in the program, an increase in benefits during the pandemic, and Pandemic EBT, a new program that provides assistance to families of schoolchildren eligible for free or reduced-price meals.

“Sales are really strong”

Shopping at farmers markets during a pandemic has its challenges, but farmers report that most people arrive wearing masks, and are being respectful.

“It makes me a little sad that I need to tell people ‘No, you cannot sniff the Thai basil,’” said Beth Schiller, owner of Dandelion Spring Farm in Bowdoinham, who sells at the Portland Farmers’ Market.

Customers are being more adventurous in their choices, farmers say, since they have more time to experiment in the kitchen. Schiller says the way things are set up at markets this year – spaced stalls, social distancing – each customer gets individual face time with the farmers, “so there’s a place to have a conversation.”



A shopper picks out a sweet pepper from Andrews Farm. *Brianna Soukup/Staff Photographer*

“So it’s like ‘This is a farmer-endorsed Vietnamese coriander,’” she said. “’This is new, and it is OK. It has been hand-selected for me.’”

Mike Bahner, who grows Hakurei summer turnips, striped German tomatoes and other certified organic produce on Bahner Farm in Belmont, sells his vegetables at the Bar Harbor and Camden farmers markets, towns that

are traditional summer tourist havens.

“The local demand has been very strong from the year-round residents,” Bahner said. “We know from looking at our numbers that we’re seeing a third fewer customers, but our sales are still really strong.”

Bahner and his wife and fellow farmer, Christa, estimate that their customer base at the markets is one third locals, one third six-month residents and one third three-month residents, with a smattering of weekend tourists thrown in. Bahner said some part-time residents are staying in the area longer because they are working remotely or aren’t putting their kids in school.

“The tourists shop relative to how they’re staying,” he said. “If they’re doing an Airbnb and cooking, renting, or camping and cooking, they’re pretty good customers. But weekenders staying at an inn are eating out all the time and are not big customers, though they might cruise through. They might get a pizza. They might buy maple syrup.”

Bahner also surmises that the pandemic protections put in place at the markets may be causing some people to stay home. Lingering is discouraged. Picnic tables have been removed. The Camden market usually has weekly entertainment, but not this year. Many markets, including the ones in Portland and Bridgton, have also asked that just one member of a household do the shopping to keep the crowds under control.

Social butterflies skip

All of these factors tend to weed out the customers who come to the market mostly to socialize.

“If your main reason to go to the farmers market is to go with your dog and get a coffee and walk around and chat with people in town and buy a few things, you might not be going this year,” he said. “You might just be staying home.”

BrennaMae Thomas-Googins, owner of Patch Farm in Denmark – which raises certified organic vegetables, herbs, chicken and pork – says the Bridgton farmers market is also seeing fewer day-trippers, but experienced an early surge of out-of-state shoppers with second homes in the area. That has, in turn, kept some locals at home who have “expressed anxiety” about mingling with shoppers from potentially COVID-heavy states.

Still, Thomas-Googins, who helps manage the Bridgton market and also attends the Kennebunk market, said overall sales have been consistent, if not better, than in previous years. People are buying more from fewer vendors, she said; some vendors stayed home for health reasons, others found they can sell most of their product at their own farm stands because the demand for local food is so high.

Thomas-Googins says her own farm stand sales are up 220 percent over last year. CSAs – community-supported agriculture programs in which consumers can pre-pay for a weekly or monthly share of the farm's harvest – are doing a booming business as well. Perisho, Bahner and Thomas-Googins all said the number of participants in their CSAs has about doubled.

None of the farmers attending markets are going home with unsold food at the end of the day, Thomas-Googins said. Meat is hard to keep in coolers. Bread and dairy products are selling fast.

As for her own farm, Thomas-Googins has only visited the Kennebunk market four times this summer "because we don't have the product to bring because we're selling it all here." And yet, in just those four visits, she's made 75 percent of what she did in weekly visits during the entire 2019 season.



Dayna Klein and her son Charley, 13, shop at the Yarmouth Farmers' Market in late August. Klein, who comes to the market every week, said she was thrilled to find out it would extend into November this year. "I love being able to patronize the farmers directly," Klein said, "especially with things the way they are now." *Brianna Soukup/Staff photographer*

In past years, Lucas Rumler and his wife, who live in Mount Vernon, were mostly social shoppers at the Belgrade farmers market, which they visited once or twice a month, usually to grab a coffee and pastry. If they saw something that looked good, or that they couldn't

grow themselves, they'd buy it. The rest of their food they either grew in their own garden or bought on occasional trips to Hannaford.

This year they switched markets, going to Hallowell instead. The Belgrade market seemed to have a lot of tourists, Rumler said, and Hallowell seemed like the smart choice to avoid mixing with people from other states that might have higher infection rates. They shop for bread and vegetables at the market weekly and buy food for Rumler's mother-in-law as well. They still buy about half their meat at Hannaford, using the Hannaford-To-Go curbside pickup program.

"We haven't been in a grocery store since March," Rumler said. "There is that element of precaution, like, why expose ourselves if we don't have to? The fact that the market's in the open air, and everybody there wears a mask, and that the vendors aren't handling money, they're actually having you put money directly into a bucket. There are all these ways they've taken COVID into account that make us feel very comfortable to shop there."

The couple both work from home, and are cooking more, so they need to buy more food, Rumler said.

"We've always cooked a lot, although we used to go out to eat once a week." he said. "Of course, now we're not. I think we've ordered takeout three times since March."

Birth of a market

In at least one case, the pandemic has sprouted a new farmers market – Long Cove Farmers Market, held every Monday from 3 to 6 p.m. at East Forty Farm and Dairy in Waldoboro.



Shoppers at the Yarmouth Farmers' Market in late August. Customers are down, but sales are up across the state. *Brianna Soukup/Staff photographer*

Cheesemaker Allison Lakin, founder of Lakin's Gorges Cheese, and her husband, chef/farmer Neal Foley, heard early in the pandemic that many farmers markets were selling out, but they had no local market to attend. Last year, the town of Waldoboro closed its market because of declining attendance, Lakin said. So the couple got permission from the town to start their own market, which will run through Oct. 12.

"It's a little market, but you can get everything you want there," Lakin said, including cheese, pork, pasta, soap, honey, jam, olive oil and, of course, vegetables. Oyster Creek Mushroom Co. has a stand, and Spartan Sea Farms sells oysters and kelp. Lakin recently

added her homemade, frozen lasagna and ravioli, which have proven popular with people who need a break from cooking.

The market, located next to the farm's cow pasture, has been attracting an average of 200 people every week, Lakin said. It is such a big draw that even a book stall run by volunteers for the Waldoboro Public Library, who have been selling used books for $1 each, have raised enough money to pay the rent on the library's used book store.

"The first two weeks were insane," Lakin recalled. "We had to make sure that we were counting the number of people and doing crowd control. But now people seem to be really spacing themselves out."

The farm follows CDC guidelines by requiring, among other measures, that customers wear face coverings and stay six feet apart – which is, apparently, one cow's length. A handwashing station operated by a foot pump, along with a touchless soap dispenser, has been installed in the middle of the market. Barriers have been set up in front of all the products "so people can't just fondle them," Lakin said.

Lakin's cheese operation, which sold to a lot of restaurants, is still hurting – sales are about 30 percent of what they would normally be – but the farm side of the business is doing well.

"We've processed 12 pigs in last six months, and we're not having any trouble selling the pork," Lakin said. In normal times, the farm would process half that many animals.

The new market has also raised the farm's visibility in the community. Lakin's cheese-tasting classes are booked into mid-September. The farm's socially distanced Cowside Supper for September, which features tables for two set up all around the farm – so you might be dining next to the cows, the pigs, or in the garden – is nearly sold out.

It's clear the pandemic has helped raise awareness of local farms and what they have to offer. The Bridgton farmers market surveyed its customers a few weeks ago, and many indicated they are "far less interested in going to the grocery store," Thomas-Googins said.

"A few people also mentioned that the pandemic has kind of shed light on our food system in a little bit more of an intense manner," she said. "The (agriculture) system is a little broken. Big ag has some struggles, and I think that really helped to awaken some people who are your every-once-in-a-while farmers market customers."

Related Headlines

Farmers adapt to get local food to customers during outbreak

Invalid username/password.

Success. Please wait for the page to reload. If the page does not reload within 5 seconds, please refresh the page.

Enter your email and password to access comments.

Forgot Password?

Don't have a Talk profile?

Hi {SUB NAME}, to comment on stories you must create a commenting profile. This profile is in addition to your subscription and website login.
Already have one? Login.

Invalid username/password.

Please check your email to confirm and complete your registration.

Create a commenting profile by providing an email address, password and display name. You will receive an email to complete the registration. Please note the display name will appear on screen when you participate.

Already registered? Log in to join the discussion.

Only subscribers are eligible to post comments. Please subscribe or login to participate in the conversation. Here's why.

Use the form below to reset your password. When you've submitted your account email, we will send an email with a reset code.

Log out of Comments

« Previous

Green Plate Special: One shopping trip and one-time prep nets a flavorful, versatile braise
Next »

Eat & Run: Just off the highway, Day's makes for satisfying stop
© 2020