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Farmers markets a growing opportunity

By Mark Parker

Emporia, Kansas - Cultivating a growing opportunity for farmers requires the cooperation of communities, policy makers and the growers themselves, according to a national authority on farmers markets.

Speaking to producers at the recent Kansas Farmers Markets Conference in Emporia, Don Wambles, past president of the nationwide grassroots organization, the Farmers Market Coalition, called farmers markets “a bright spot for American agriculture.” As a mechanism for bringing wholesome, locally grown food to the public, farmers markets benefit consumers and communities as well as the folks who grow the food, he said.

“The number of farmers markets across the country continues to grow because they benefit everyone,” said Wambles who is the director of the Alabama Farmers Market Authority. “We need to raise awareness about where to find and how to identify locally grown food and remove obstacles to buying locally.”

Wambles outlined state and federal programs that facilitate farmers markets, noting that full funding is needed for efforts such as the Farmers Market Nutrition Program that provides coupons that seniors and Women, Infants and Children (WIC) participants can use to purchase fresh produce from farmers or farmers markets.

Although successful farmers markets require the efforts of legislators and community leaders, they begin in the fields and gardens of growers. For the grower portion of the recipe, Wambles had some advice based on his experiences in Alabama where, with his leadership over the past decade, the number of farmers markets has increased from 17 to 114 with more than 1,500 small family farmers benefiting.

First of all, Wambles emphasized, freshness and quality are the main reasons consumers shop at farmers markets. In addition to filling that need, he advised, growers should find out what consumers visiting farmers markets actually want. Preferred fruits, vegetables and other products may differ from one region to the next, according to local demographics and local preferences, he said. Additionally, growers may have opportunities to profit from meeting needs that aren't being met. “Pay attention to ethnic groups in your community,” he said. “Find out what they want and they'll come to you.”

Determining what the community wants, he added, goes beyond what growers bring to market, “it determines what you plant,” he said.

Regarding the actual merchandising of products at the farmers market, Wambles stressed that a grower's goal should not be to sell-out quickly. “Strive for steady selling all day,” he recommended. “If it's a four-hour market and everything's gone in two hours, people are going to go away disappointed and they might not come back.”

Wamble's other tips for growers wanting to make the most of farmers markets included:

- Let your customers get to know you. Consumers like to know the people from whom they buy food, Wamble said. Displaying farm photos in the market booth is one way of helping them accomplish that. An attractive sign with a farm name is also very important. “You want people to know who you are,” he said.

- Offer variety. It’s much more difficult to sell a truckload of one item than it is to sell a variety of products. More products encourage people to shop and spend more time—and money—in your booth. In Wamble’s experience, growers who have a variety of products sell more, particularly if those products include “draw crops” such as tomatoes, strawberries or peaches.

- The display is the first thing people see so make sure it is attractive, showcases the products and conveys pride in those products.

- Props such as tablecloths, wicker baskets and apple crates attract buyers and enable the grower to better display his or her products. Keep displays up off the ground and prop the backs of containers up so that the product is slanted toward the customer. “Remember,” Wambles cautioned, “you’re not selling a crop, you’re selling food.”

- As products are sold, switch to smaller and smaller containers as your stock is reduced. “People definitely don’t want to buy the last of what you have so you need to convey an image of plenty,” Wambles said.

- Salespersons should have a pleasant appearance and pay attention to the customer. Talking on a cell phone is a major annoyance to buyers. Sellers should also keep busy restocking and rearranging whenever there are no customers to wait upon. When there are waiting customers, be sure to acknowledge them so they don’t think they’re being overlooked. “Body language talks,” Wambles noted. “Don’t look idle. That’s unattractive to buyers.”

- Samples, recipes and tastings enhance sales.

- Avoid price wars with other farmers market participants because they hurt everyone. The other vendors at the market should not be seen as competitors because more vendors mean more customers for everyone.

- If you have slack time, it may be an opportunity to add value to your products. Snapping beans or shelling peas, for example, shows activity and draws customers as well as increasing your earning potential.

“Consumers love buying direct from farmers,” Wambles observed. “That’s something Wal-Mart can’t do. (A lot of) stores have tried to mimic the farmers market concept but they don’t have the farmer there—that’s the key ingredient so make the most of it.”

The Kansas Farmers Market Conference featured experts addressing a wide variety of topics focused on issues such as specialty crop management, marketing, food safety, legislation and licensing.

The Kansas Farmers Market Conference was presented by the Kansas Rural Center’s Farmers Market Project with support from a USDA Farmers Market Promotion Program Grant. Additional sponsors included the Kansas Department of Commerce, Rural Development; the Farmers Market Coalition; the Downtown Lawrence Farmers’ Market; and the Kansas Center for Sustainable Agriculture and Alternative Crops.

A wealth of related information is available at www.ksfarmersmarkets.org and www.kansasruralcenter.org.