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## Growing a market: Running or selling at farmers markets take year-round work

By Ann Ring Apr 25, 2016

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Carlos Olbra, left, with Huizenga Farm in Henderson, Ill. helps customer Pam DePauw of Port Byron during the opening day of the Freight House Farmers Market in Davenport Saturday, May 4, 2015.

Every October, when the last vegetable root is pulled and the cash box rings its last sale, the farmers market season comes to a close, and all is calm until the following May.

Well, not necessarily. Vendors and farmers market boards of directors alike stay busy all year long.

Take Sarah and Nathan Hahn, of Altona, Ill., who own Beagle Creek Farm, for instance. The couple sell chemical-free vegetables at the Freight House and Galva farmers markets. In 2013, the couple started with a 1,200-square-foot garden plot. Now, they have a five-acre vegetable farm, and next year, they'll expand into honey.

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"We definitely stay busy with our farmers market business even though this isn't our only source of income," Sarah says.

"I continually plant and sell throughout the growing season," she says, "selling sometimes through Thanksgiving, so my year typically begins in November. By December, we're finished selling, so from late fall into December and January, we're putting our plants to bed, looking over our last season's sales, doing bookkeeping, making repairs and maintaining our equipment, looking at seed catalogs and planning a schedule for next year's crops."

Come February, she already has started plants in their greenhouse, an amenity purchased from their first season's sales in 2013.

"That first year, our plants were under grow lights all over a room in the house. That was kind of hard to do with so many plants," she says, laughing.

"March and April we're planting in the ground, then weeding. May through August is nonstop for us — we're planting, weeding and selling."

During the farmers market selling season, Sarah sets her alarm for 4:30 a.m. on Saturdays to prepare for Beagle Creek Farm's spot at the Davenport Freight House Farmers Market.

"We harvest the day before, plus we wash, bundle and bag the vegetables, then set them in a cooler that's in the shed," she says. "After my coffee Saturday morning, I'm out loading the van with our display items, crates, our produce and grabbing last-minute stuff. We need to leave by 5:45 or so" to get to Davenport by 7 a.m. It takes about an hour to set up the display, so they're ready by the time customers begin arriving at 8 a.m.

Claude Nicholson, of Fairfield, also works year-round behind the scenes, but on both sides — as a seasoned board member for the Fairfield Farmers Market, and as a vendor, selling certified-organic vegetables and fruits, nuts, Aronia berries, garlic and leeks from his four acres.

"They call me the sheriff," he says, with a laugh. "Every market has its market master, and that's me," he says. "We police ourselves." As a market master, he peruses the 45- to 60-vendor market site during Saturdays' open hours, making sure everything's going well, answering questions, and quieting down "carnival barkers" who try to bring customers to their table.

About two years ago, Nicholson also was involved with auditing 35 to 40 vendor sites at random, and seeing to it that vendors were following the Fairfield Farmers Market strict, locally-grown policy, which states that all products for sale at the market must be grown or produced in Jefferson County or its bordering counties.

Nothing really came of it, Nicholson says, but it gave vendors pause for thought.

Nicholson also collects vendor fees, but on the other side of the aisle, his Aronia berries are a crowd favorite, having one of the highest antioxidant values than any other fruit. Since 2008, all of the products he grows are certified organic. It costs a little more, but it's worth it to him.

Near the end of this last March, he and the rest of the board of directors were getting ready to add two more members to the board and vote on its officers. From fall until May, this board meets only when it needs to. Some topics they discuss outside of the May-through-October season are entertainment — how often to host, for example — porta-potties and animals.

"Dogs are a landmine," he says. "People do pick up after them, but not everyone."

Gene Mohr of Hampton, Ill., stays busy all year as president of The Growers Markets of the Quad Cities, which serves sites at UnityPoint health in Moline, Skate City in East Moline, and the Rock Island County Health Department. Mohr also helps to oversee the vendors to ensure they follow the rules, including one that states that 100 percent of all produce sold at the Growers Market must be grown within 75 miles of the market, and the seller must grow 100 percent of the produce offered for sale.

The market forbids any re-selling, which can and does occur at other markets.

In mid-March, Mohr, who also is a farmers market vendor, and the board of directors were preparing for the Quad City Conservation Alliance (QCCA) Lawn and Garden Show, where The Growers Market participates every year.

"Our year really starts in October, after the market closes," says Mohr. "During October and November, we nominate and vote on officers, talk about the last season, then we meet again in January."

Once the New Year rolls around, the group focuses on its vendors attending the Lawn and Garden Show, updating their brochure and website, and planning events to be held at the farmers market on special days such as Mother's Day weekend. Other behind-the-scenes work includes securing insurance and permits, gathering contracts from more than 30 vendors, and advertising.

After being involved with The Growers Markets of the Quad Cities for more than 20 years, there aren't a lot of new problems that arise. Through the years, Mohr, of course, has seen the expansion and popularity of farmers markets, and does not believe the market is oversaturated. He says that although the number of vendors wax and wane, The Growers Markets have done pretty well, growing from one site to three.

Sarah Hahn points out that there's room at these markets for every niche: the conventional grower, the chemical-free grower — such as Beagle Creek Farm— and the certified-organic grower such as Nicholson.

"I don't really feel like it's a competition," she says. "We all sell different varieties, and it's all a matter of choice for what people want."

*Ann Ring is a frequent Radish contributor.*

