

Selling to Schools: Tips for Farmers

There is an opportunity to get the food you grow into the mouths and bellies of schoolchildren in Oregon! Selling to schools can provide a new market for your products, and helps connect children with the source of their food. There are over 70 school districts in Oregon who are purchasing local food for meals and snacks, teaching children about where their food comes from, and running educational programs such as edible gardens and farm field trips. Learn more about specific districts near you at: www.fns.usda.gov/farmentoschool/census#/state/or

About school food service

School customers face a number of challenges when purchasing locally grown food. Two primary constraints are budget and labor realities. Schools typically have about \$1.35 to spend on food for each meal, for milk, grains, protein, fruits, vegetables and condiments. Schools also have a limited number of employees. These constraints often result in schools serving food that is cost effective and easy to prepare. Schools food service are also required to procure food items (and other items) through a bid process because they are spending federal or state dollars on the purchase. This may be as simple as an 'informal bid' in which a nutrition director will provide you with specifications for a product (type, variety, quantity, delivery, etc.) and then ask for a quote from you for those products. These quotes need to be collected from at least three growers in order to allow for sufficient 'competition'.

Price

Schools are generally buying products at low prices, although there are exceptions. Some farmers are able to market crops they wouldn't otherwise be able to sell, for example small apples, and are getting a good price for them. Schools are also a great outlet for surplus crops if you've grown more than you can sell to your regular markets.

Delivery and processing

Most schools require that food be delivered, and require that it be washed and boxed or bagged. Many schools don't have functional kitchens, so they have limited ability to prep and process products and require that certain products be prepped by the vendor. Schools also tend to have limited storage capacity, so large quantities or highly perishable crops can be difficult for them to manage for long periods of time. It is easiest for school districts to buy through a distributor rather than directly from local farms, although smaller districts are often more comfortable buying directly. Smaller distributors, for example Emerald Fruit and Produce based in Eugene, often source product directly from local farms.

Promotion

Success in farm to school can grow when you do more than just sell your product to the school. Farm to school provides many opportunities to be engaged and promote your product, farm, and story, while educating students and the community in the process. Consider the following:

- Provide photos and blurbs about your farm to school food service or teachers for inclusion in school menus or newsletters
- Share your farm to school story with your own community. Maybe that means writing about it on your farm blog or CSA newsletter. It's a great way to show the good things you are doing in your community, and to encourage others to participate in farm to school activities

- Work with local media to tell the story of farm to school
- Visit the cafeteria while your food is on the menu to make the farmer connection for students

About your farm

Before talking to schools, here are some things you might want to consider in terms of your own farm and capacity:

- **PRODUCT:** Know what you grow, how much you grow, when it is available, and how it can be packaged and/or processed for schools.
- **COST OF PRODUCTION:** Know how much it costs you to produce an item so you can agree on a fair and profitable price with schools.
- **FOOD SAFETY:** Review your food safety practices. Organizing your food safety practices into a handy document like a Food Safety Plan will help you explain what you do to food service directors.
- **LIABILITY INSURANCE:** Review and make copies of your liability insurance policies. In most cases, a school will request you to carry liability insurance coverage (at about \$1M). If you are selling to a school through a distributor, then your relationship will be more directly with your distributor.
- **DELIVERY:** Many schools will require delivery to one or more locations, possibly on more than one day of the week. What is your capacity for delivery? Know what you can do, and what you can't. How can you work collaboratively with other farmers or distributors, or schools themselves, to make delivery work?
- **EDUCATION:** Are you interested in visiting the school cafeteria or classroom to share knowledge about the food you grow? If so, this may be a great benefit to the school. If you aren't interested or able to engage in educational activities or have students to your farm, can you partner with other local farmers to provide some sort of educational experience?

Other Resources

National Farm to School Network: A clearinghouse of resources on farm to school topics
www.farmentoschool.org

USDA Farm to School: The home of the USDA Farm to School Program
<http://www.fns.usda.gov/f2s/farm-school>

The Wisconsin Farm to School Toolkit for Producers: A publication of the Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems at University of Wisconsin-Madison, with lots of good general information, sample invoices, etc. <http://www.cias.wisc.edu/toolkits/#farmers>

For more information contact

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