

Scaling-up beginning farmers for wholesale production

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Abstract

With nearly 15 million people that live within 250 miles of Kansas City, the demand for local food is increasing. Local beginning farmers in the region want to reach an emerging wholesale market. However, selling directly to consumers demands different skills than the wholesale market requires. There are many educational programs offered in the region that are focused on direct to consumer sales. Unfortunately, there is a gap in educational programs that are offered to support beginning farmers that wish to expand into wholesale markets. In 2018, the Beginning Farmer Wholesale Project was started within the Growing Growers Kansas City program in congruence with the overall mission to improve the skills and livelihoods of the region's growers. The project offers support and training to beginning farmers as they begin to navigate new market opportunities. It provides on-farm technical assistance, mentorship, opportunities to connect to wholesale buyers, a workshop series, a manual and an extensive foodshed GIS map. The ongoing project has seen several contributions to improving farmer access to wholesale markets. As of 2020, six workshops have been conducted that have covered a variety of farm production and marketing skills. Six farmer mentees have enrolled in the mentor program which enlists nine farmer mentors from across the region. Over twenty farmers have utilized the technical assistance service on their Kansas and Missouri farm operations and the farmer buyer matching program has resulted in thirteen beginning farmers gaining access to new markets. The project highlights the value of collaboration among organizations and the importance of offering multiple farmer services in order to improve wholesale access.

Keywords

agricultural education, training, mentorship, marketing, local food

Presenter Information

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With nearly 15 million people that live within 250 miles of Kansas City, the demand for local food is increasing. Local beginning farmers in the region want to reach an emerging wholesale market. However, selling directly to consumers demands different skills than the wholesale market requires. There are many educational programs offered in the region that are focused on direct to consumer sales. Unfortunately, there is a gap in educational programs that are offered to support beginning farmers that wish to expand into wholesale markets. In 2018, the Beginning Farmer Wholesale Project was started within the Growing Growers Kansas City program in congruence with the overall mission to improve the skills and livelihoods of the region's growers. The project offers support and training to beginning farmers as they begin to navigate new market opportunities. It provides on-farm technical assistance, mentorship, opportunities to connect to wholesale buyers, a workshop series, a manual and an extensive foodshed GIS map. The ongoing project has seen several contributions to improving farmer access to wholesale markets. As of 2020, six workshops have been conducted that have covered a variety of farm production and marketing skills. Six farmer mentees have enrolled in the mentor program which enlists nine farmer mentors from across the region. Over twenty farmers have utilized the technical assistance service on their Kansas and Missouri farm operations and the farmer buyer matching program has resulted in thirteen beginning farmers gaining access to new markets. The project highlights the value of collaboration among organizations and the importance of offering multiple farmer services in order to improve wholesale access.

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INTRODUCTION

Growing Growers

The Beginning Farmer Wholesale Project started as a component of the Growing Growers program. In 2003, Growing Growers Kansas City was established with support from a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant in response to both a high unmet demand for local produce and a lack of farmers to meet this demand in the Kansas City region. The purpose of the program was to train new sustainable growers and improve the skills of existing growers in the Kansas City foodshed. Central parts of the program include grower-directed learning and networking as well as partnership with extension and local organizations. This collaboration provides a comprehensive knowledge of core skills vital to successful market farming such as production, marketing and business management. Currently, Growing Growers KC is a self-supporting partnership program that is led by local extension professionals as well as non-for-profit groups in the region. While most of the program's audience includes beginning farmers, many established growers seek to improve their own skills and enhance their sustainable farming knowledge by attending advanced workshops, farm tours, and field days.

The core components of Growing Growers include: workshops, farm tours, a listserv and the apprenticeship program. Every year, the workshops include six core competencies for growers as well as a variety of elective workshops. The workshops are often followed with a farm tour that demonstrates the classroom material in real-life scenarios. Presenters include extension specialists, partner organization staff and experienced farmers. Another component of the program includes

the listserv which is a networking tool for members of the Kansas City foodshed. Farmers, buyers, extension and organization personnel are just some of the stakeholders that comprise the email list. Finally, the apprenticeship program utilizes the knowledge of experienced farmers within the Kansas City region to train prospective growers. Through the facilitation of this mentorship accompanied with the workshops, apprentices learn the skills necessary to enter sustainable agriculture businesses.

Since 2003, Growing Growers KC has achieved several outcomes from the ongoing program services. Many of the graduates who completed the apprenticeship program have either started their own market farms or entered a career within the local food sector. Additionally, workshop attendance has been popular in Kansas City and attracts beginning and established growers. Income from both the apprenticeship program and workshops has contributed towards the program's goal of becoming self-sustaining. Although this program has succeeded in contributing to new growers in the Kansas City region, the majority of apprentices graduating the program enter direct to consumer markets. These niche markets often attract small-scale, beginning farmers due to favorable prices from consumers but this can be accompanied by high labor demands and low volumes in sales (Thompson and Gaskin, 2018). The apprenticeship program is also limited in its target audience as the program curricula is best suited for individuals with little knowledge or experience looking to begin their farming careers.

Demand for wholesale

Recently, two food hub feasibility studies in the area found that the demand for local food in the wholesale market vastly outweighs the number of farmers growing for this market (SCALE Inc., 2014; BNIM et al., 2014). Both studies also indicated an interest from over 90 growers that had less than 10 years of experience in expanding their acreage in production with 82% of specialty crop growers expressing moderate to great interest in growing for a food hub wholesale market (SCALE Inc., 2014; BNIM et al., 2014).

In Kansas and Missouri, most specialty crop farmers are small-scale and make very little in gross cash farm income. In addition to a statewide decline in the number of farms, Kansas specialty crop farms make up just 0.5% of all U.S. specialty crop farms and in Missouri just 1.4% (USDA, 2017). A recent survey from the Kansas Department of Agriculture showed that over 80% of specialty crop producers farmed less than 10 acres and over 60% of the producers grossed an annual on-farm income of less than \$10,000 (KDA, 2017).

There are many advantages to wholesale production that could improve economic growth among specialty crop producers. Consumer interest for local food has increased greatly which have caused more wholesale markets to seek out local production (Howard, 2014). Buyers range from standard distributors and grocery stores to the increasingly popular farm-to-table restaurants and food hubs. While producers can charge higher prices through direct to consumer markets, they also can pose higher marketing costs than when selling wholesale (Hardesty and Leff, 2010). Research shows that direct marketing requires more additional farm labor due to growing a wide variety of produce in order to meet consumer expectations (Thompson and Gaskin, 2018). Unlike direct markets, wholesale buyers can accept large volumes of produce through a single transaction, allowing for farmers to offload greater quantities of produce than direct markets. The smaller scale of mid-sized farms gives producers the ability to remain flexible and innovative enough to respond to highly differentiated markets (Kirschenmann et al., 2004).

Research shows that selling direct to consumer demands different skills than selling to the wholesale market such as crop specialization and mechanization (Thompson and Gaskin, 2018). Most programs offered in the Kansas City region are focused on production for direct to consumer

sales and offer in-depth, yet introductory information about how to farm. There are few resources in the region that provide education offered to beginning farmers who have some experience growing and need help expanding their farm and markets.

As part of the Growing Growers Kansas City program, the Beginning Farmer Wholesale Project was implemented as a response to the needs of a growing wholesale demand for local food and to improve the overall viability of farming in the region. This project not only seeks to give Midwest growers the skills needed to move into wholesale production, but it also helps them gain access to the wholesale market by utilizing a network of organizations that help create strong relationships with buyers. Networks like these can enable small and mid-sized farms to efficiently supply substantial quantities of unique specialty crop products for wholesale buyers (Kirschenmann et al., 2004).

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Project structure

The Beginning Farmer Wholesale Project was established in 2018 with funding from the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program. The following organizations collaborated to make the project possible: West Central Missouri Community Action Agency, Kansas State Research and Extension, University of Missouri Extension, Cultivate KC, KC Healthy Kids and The Kansas City Food Hub. Collectively, members of these organizations have decades of experience with farmers and local food systems. The advisory committee is made up of staff from the partner organizations and farmer advisors and they meet monthly to discuss the program objectives and to further develop program services.

Components of the program

There are a variety of services and resources for Kansas and Missouri farmers through this project. Currently offered is the mentor farmer program, one-on-one technical assistance program, farmer to buyer matching service and workshop series. After facing challenges surrounding farmer attendance, workshops and mentoring services have been emphasized in off-season months to encourage participation. This strategic scheduling has greatly increased usage of the project services among growers. Future plans include a foodshed GIS map, the Demystifying the Wholesale Market Manual and completion of a seven-part video series that was shot during summer 2020.

1. Mentor farmer program.

The goal of the mentor farmer program is to match farms with seasoned growers from around the country to receive consultation and mentoring services. Farmer mentors and mentees who are interested in participating must go through an application process which is reviewed by the advisory committee. Table 1 states the required criteria needed for farmers to apply. Mentees may receive up to 25 hours of targeted consulting services annually which are financially supported by the project.

As of 2020, there are nine farmer mentors from around the country that provide a unique set of skills and training. An added benefit of this service is that mentees can utilize different mentors in order to best serve their own interests and production goals. Survey data has shown that farmer mentees have learned about new resources surrounding wholesale production and they felt supported by their farmer mentors.

Table 1. Applicant Criteria

Applicant Criteria	
Mentors	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Minimum of eight years experience farming 2. Minimum of three years selling into the wholesale market 3. Demonstrate skills in effectively educating and communicating others 4. Desire to help the next generation of farmers to succeed 5. Willingness to share knowledge of their farming business to help other farmers
Mentees	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Farming less than 10 years 2. Desire to start or expand production in the wholesale market 3. Desire for one-on-one assistance from an experienced farmer

2. One-on-one technical assistance.

Beginning farmers can request direct technical assistance from agricultural experts with tailored support for farming skills. These specialists are recruited from within the project’s partner organizations and include extension professionals and other urban agriculture educators. Some of the requested areas for assistance in selling for wholesale has included crop production planning specific for the wholesale market and how to sell to restaurants. Assistance in growing for wholesale has also included topics like high tunnel production, soil fertility, and fruit yield and quality.

3. Farmer-to-buyer matching.

Advisors from partner organizations offer consultation and facilitate connection with buyers to increase market access for participating farms. Beginning farmers can be matched with the appropriate wholesale market that fits their goals and production capabilities. Advisors work with farmers so that they understand all the benefits and risks of selling to wholesale before they choose a market. Some of the wholesale buyers that farmers have connected to include local restaurants and the KC Food Hub.

4. Workshops.

A total of 13 workshops were planned for the first three years of the project along with two wholesale production farm tours. An additional workshop was added in the spring of 2020 due to the volatile market changes surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic. These workshops are outlined in Table 2.

The advisory committee organizes and runs these workshops which are located around the Kansas City region. Along with experienced speakers from the advisory committee, field experts and experienced farmers are recruited to present at the workshops. These events have taken place in a variety of locations around Kansas City and included farm tours hosted by local and experienced growers. The workshop series is structured around crop production and business skills specific to wholesale.

Table 2. Workshop Series

Crop Focused Workshops:

- Solanaceae Part I
- Solanaceae Part II
- Cucurbits Part I
- Cucurbits Part II
- Brassicas
- Greens
- Sweet Potatoes

Skills Focused Workshops:

- Production Planning
 - Business Management and Strategies for Wholesale Success
 - Labor Management and Taxes
 - Demystifying the Wholesale Market
 - Winter Production
 - Farm Transitions
 - Take Your Food Online
-

5. Foodshed GIS.

Plans for a comprehensive map of the Kansas City foodshed include an interface with layers added for Farmers Markets, CSA's, restaurants, wholesalers, food rescue and recovery, composting sites, and seed and supply providers. The map's aggregated data will enable partner organizations to better serve beginning farmers across the region by developing a network of wholesale opportunities for local growers. One goal is that buyers could use the map to recruit farmers across the region and then allocate produce grown in urban and rural areas to serve their urban consumers.

6. Demystifying the Wholesale Market Manual.

A manual is currently under development that will provide technical information, recordkeeping materials, infrastructure design, relationship development and branding skills. It will be informed by stakeholders, buyers, and current wholesale growers through case studies. While existing materials include information on wholesale production like marketing, growing and post-harvest handling, this manual will focus on the planning, marketing and buyer characteristics that are specific to the Kansas City region. Actual examples of local contract agreements, buyer requirement sheets and other templates will be included. Also featured will be case studies of wholesale producers within the Kansas City area who have become successful in their own operations.

7. Videos Series.

A series of seven, six-minute videos were filmed in 2020 on the top crops for wholesale production featuring farms across the Kansas City region. The purpose of these videos is to deliver crop specific information on production, packing and marketing. Seven crops were chosen that are both popular among wholesale buyers and ideal for small to medium scale producers to grow. Crops include tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet potatoes, salad greens, peppers, summer squash and broccoli.

Experienced farmers who sell to wholesale markets around the Kansas region were recruited to speak about these crops and facilitate footage of their farm production. These videos will allow beginning farmers to learn directly from expert growers and see their fields and production facilities.

PROJECT EVALUATION

In order to demonstrate achievement of goals and improve the quality of the program services, an evaluation plan was established through outcome-based reporting. In conjunction with the advisory committee and staff, a third-party evaluator from the University of Missouri assists in developing data collection protocols and designing survey instruments as well as analyzing survey data and writing evaluation reports. This framework enables the project to continually measure performance and adjust as necessary.

Tools such as workshop surveys and follow-up surveys are used to measure objectives and collect data. Additionally, the project plans to conduct annual in-person interviews with beginning farmers who utilize at least three of the project's services. These methods contribute to a variety of information collected such as baselines of farming skill competencies and farmer satisfaction of infrastructure.

Some of the information captured with these methods has resulted in identifying the changes in practices farmers have made since involvement with the project. It has also provided important insight on the share of a farmer's production sold in wholesale markets and change in income due to wholesale markets. Additionally, survey responses have shed light on the needs and challenges that farmers face when entering wholesale production which include access to land, supplies and equipment.

RESULTS

This project was started to help provide education, mentorship and networking for urban and rural beginning farmers wanting to enter the wholesale market in the Kansas City region. The collaborative structure of the program has enabled multiple partner organizations to work together in order to implement the various programs and services (see Figure 1). Currently in the mentorship program, there are nine farmer mentors who have advanced knowledge of producing and selling at the wholesale level and six farmer mentees have enrolled to use these services. Over 20 farmers have utilized the technical assistance service on their Kansas and Missouri farm operations. One technical assistance visit in Kansas resulted in a Kansas Department of Agriculture Specialty Crop Block grant award to trial netting for improved fruit yield and quality in tree fruit. Additionally, the farmer buyer matching program has resulted in thirteen beginning farmers who have utilized this service and gained access to new wholesale markets.

A total of five workshops were completed in the first year and an additional workshop was produced when the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020. This unique workshop originated from the pandemic's impact on farmers' sales outlets and markets, the disruption in food supply and the increase in consumer habits to buy groceries online. The workshop aimed to help farmers adapt to these changes by learning to sell online. Seven farms were recruited to speak at the workshop that had already been utilizing online sales and were experiencing rapid growth in orders.

This project hopes to continue to administer and improve the programs that have been established which include the mentorship program, farmer to buyer matching services, one-on-one technical assistance and workshops. It will also soon implement programs that are currently in progress which include the GIS map, video series and manual.



(a)



(b)



(c)



(d)

Figure 1: Project Highlights. (a) Technical assistance, (b) advisory board collaboration, (c) mentorship, and (d) workshops are essential parts of the program.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

Short term outcomes include increasing farmer participants' knowledge of wholesale marketing and production skills. Medium term outcomes include increasing the number of beginning farmers entering the wholesale market and farmer implementation of learned skills. Lastly, long-term outcomes include developing a group of farmers that can collectively meet the needs of the growing wholesale demand for local food. These outcomes aim to improve the overall viability of farm businesses in the region by substantially increasing sales and gross cash farm income through facilitated buyer networking.

Challenges

Over the last two years various challenges have been met with the program. For the mentor program, recruitment for beginning farmers was slow to start and during peak-season, many farmers lost communication with their mentors which could possibly be due to their busy schedules. Program assistance will be emphasized in off-season times when mentees have more time to utilize the program. The project also hired a part-time position whose role is to help facilitate communication with the mentors and mentees.

Similar to the reason for farmer participation in the mentor program, workshop attendance has been a challenge during the summer months. Plans to hold workshops in the off-season months will help provide farmers with more opportunities to attend. The initiation of the video series was in response to this need and will also help enable farmers to learn important information at a time convenient to them.

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