

**8 MISTAKES  
OF  
SELLING  
AT  
FARMERS' MARKETS**

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## 8 MISTAKES OF SELLING AT FARMER'S MARKETS

After purchasing our five-acre farm in 1996, we wondered what we could do to make money with the acreage. Our first spring garden produced the best garden we ever had. Our soil was in great condition and we found out from our next-door neighbor that to his knowledge there had not been any chemical fertilizers, pesticides, or herbicides, used on the grounds for the previous fifteen to nineteen years. This neighbor had been baling the hay crop every year for the previous owner for all that time and she had been adamant to not let any chemicals of any kind be used. We were grateful to find this information out.

We joined our local Southwest Chapter of the Missouri Organic Association, and began attending meetings regularly, visiting area member's farms and set-ups to see what they were doing to make our steps into growing organically successful. We read everything we could get our hands on about growing vegetable and melon production, dealing with insects on our plants, soil conditioning; you name it we studied it. After doing our homework, visiting with other people that marketed at the Farmers' Market, and members of the Organic Association, we decided to grow produce for two of our local Farmers' Markets.

We attended the meetings for the Farmers' Markets to see what their individual rules were and what we would be allowed to

sell and not sell. One market had strict guidelines of what we could bring to sell, while the other one only required that we be members of the Organic Association. Mainly, we could sell the bulk of what we raised so that made it a doable situation for us. Then we planned the spaces to plant each category of produce we wanted to raise. We began with two of our five acres in production. We ordered a big roll of black plastic mulch, a big roll of row cover material, seeds, plants, and anything else needed to get us up and planting. Our mistakes for doing Farmer's Markets are as listed in the rest of this report.

**Mistake number 1:** It can be quite a large investment to do the Farmers' Markets. On top of the money it costs for soil improvements, seeds, plants, and equipment to do your gardens or farm, you need to consider that you may need to purchase your "shelter" such as a collapsible canopy, and/or pay rent for your space at the market. You will also want to purchase liability insurance to cover you in the event an accident occurs, and someone is injured from equipment at your stand, etc. Other purchases you likely will need to make will be your tables and tablecloths, baskets, or nice containers to make your display inviting to customers. A scale certified by your State's Weights and Measures Department to weigh your customer's purchases, and bags, boxes, etc., to put your customer's purchases in to take home. It certainly adds up quickly. Oh yes, fuel for your vehicle that you plan to use to haul your produce to market, insurance for that vehicle, wear, and tear repairs to keep it running so you will not miss your market.

**Mistake number 2:** Absolutely **LOVE** getting up at 4:00 A.M. or earlier, to harvest any of your last-minute FRESH produce and herbs, get them washed, dried, weighted, and bagged, if need be. Anything that you could not get done the evening before or have enough refrigerator or cooler space to keep overnight must be done the morning of your Farmers' Market. Next is loading the truck. Do as much as you can the evening before, but still it took us almost an hour just to load all the produce and coolers to keep everything cold that needed to be kept cold.

**Mistake number 3:** If your Farmers' Market is located a considerable distance from your farm, then you must consider the drive time. Many farmers must drive up to fifty miles or more to get to their markets. We were fortunate that we lived close to both markets where we sold, but that must factor into how early you need to get up on market day. You also must allow time to set everything up. If your market opens at 7:00 A.M. like ours did, you may need to factor that into the time you get up. If you have livestock to care for before you can go, that needs to be considered as well. You end up going to bed late the night before to get most everything done and get up super early on market days. We did not care for that part.

**Mistake number 4:** Market Rules. Most Farmers' Markets have bylaws and rules they set forth to keep it running smoothly. However, check out your chosen markets' rules very carefully. Many markets will not allow you to sell the same products that are already represented by other, more established market gardeners and farmers to keep the competition lower and allow for more variety of growers or displayers. Sometimes

space is not available for new growers, due to many, if not all previous members returning year after year. Crafts and homemade baked goods, and home canned foods may or may not be accepted if you were planning to sell them. Again, check the rules for each market.

**Mistake number 5: HOT WEATHER!!!** You spent days, weeks, and months, to get the nicest and best-looking produce raised. Farmers' Markets are held during some of the most miserably hot times of the year. You must be able to keep your produce looking crisp and fresh, no wilting, for the entire time from harvest to the end of the market day. Not easy when temperatures are in the mid 90 to 100-degrees or more. Especially when your market is on a black asphalt parking lot, like one of ours was!!!

**Mistake number 6: Not carrying enough Liability Insurance.** I mentioned in Mistake number 1, that you should carry liability insurance, or risk being sued if something happens to a customer in your booth, or heaven forbid, or you get sued for having produce contaminated with Salmonella, Listeria, or E Coli. Some markets won't allow you to be a member if you don't have a certificate of insurance, and some markets require that you provide them with a copy of your certificate of insurance for them to keep in their files for proof. Whether selling from a farmers' market, selling from your own farm stand on your property, or commercially, it is simply good business protection to have yourself covered. People are way too happy to sue you if they get hurt or sick because of your negligence, so protect yourself and your assets. The amount you should carry needs to be discussed with your insurer. Start by contacting your

insurance agent who insures your property now and check if they will be able to provide coverage for selling farm produce that you grow yourself. If they will not cover you, then check with other farmers to see what company they use.

**Mistake number 7: NO BATHROOMS!!!** Scout out before you go - literally, where the bathrooms are located for every market you plan to sell with. Some markets set up on parking lots of shopping malls or other businesses. Some businesses will post signs on Market days that their restrooms are for "customers only" of their stores and discourage market vendors from using them. For twenty plus years in our area, the first and one of the largest farmers' market sets up on the hot, black asphalt parking lot of our only shopping mall at least two football fields away from the mall. No portable toilets are brought in for convenience. Since there aren't any close stores and your only source of transportation (pickup truck and/or with a trailer hooked on behind) is being used as an onsite combination office, supplies container, and market store front, that means a mighty long walk to find a restroom. Consider that distance is only to the door of whatever store you are closest to. Some of the stores in that mall have their restrooms located toward the middle or opposite end of the store on the second floor. You will be away from your booth at least 20 to 30 minutes or longer. That leaves your partner alone trying to answer customer's questions, sell, package the produce, make change, watch the booth for theft, and trying to run a busy market stand.

**Mistake number 8:** Thinking you can run a busy market booth alone. First, refer to Mistake number 7. Safety is a concern most farmers do not give a thought to, however, with the public safety at so much risk today, do not even think of trying to do this alone. For the most part, people who go to the Farmers' Markets are good, honest people trying to feed their families with the best possible food they can buy at a reasonable price, but unfortunately, it only takes one bad apple to spoil market day. Do not be foolish and take unnecessary risks.

Doing the Farmers' Markets simply was not as great as we wished it could have been. We worked hard to make it work for us, but found it just was not our "cup of tea." This just puts a different spin on what to think about, and consider if you are just starting out as a new farmers' market vendor. We discovered after doing them for one six-month season, it was enough to know we did not want to do it again.

If you love doing the markets, that is GREAT! However, if you want to know how I changed my mindset and farming operation, keep up with my blog, [thefarmtotablelady.com/](http://thefarmtotablelady.com/).