

Local Foodshed Programs Create Marketing Opportunities

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You're probably familiar with the term "watershed," which refers to a geographic area in which all surface waters flow toward a common location.

The term "foodshed" is getting attention these days. It refers to the geographic area involved when a food item is produced, processed, distributed and sold to consumers.

Some food items travel thousands of miles before they reach your grocery store, but many are produced within your home county.

In Florida, there are numerous projects under way to strengthen local foodsheds, promoting local crop sales to restaurants, schools and other large buyers, creating opportunities for small farmers.

One is Florida's Farm to School program, part of a nationwide effort run by Occidental College and the Community Food Security Coalition. According to their Web site, <http://www.farmtoschool.org>, almost 50 Florida schools are involved, purchasing fresh fruits and vegetables from area farmers and serving them in school lunches.

Farmers interested in the program can contact the New North Florida Cooperative Association Inc., which pioneered the state's farm-to-school efforts in partnership with Florida A&M University. Since 2002, the association has helped farmers reach buyers for local schools. Contact information is available at <http://www.farmtoschool.org/FL/farms.htm>.

In Palm Beach County, the Localecopia Project was initiated in 2007 by the Breakers Hotel to promote locally grown foods from small farmers for the hospitality industry. This nonprofit organization aims to connect area hotels and restaurants with producers.

Localecopia also promotes economic development through a growers' cooperative, local food distributors and renewable energy. Farmers in the Palm Beach County area interested in these opportunities can learn more at <http://www.localecopia.org/>.

Food co-ops and independent grocery stores frequently obtain as much locally sourced merchandise as possible, offering another potential opportunity. You can find Florida businesses of this type at the Web site Local Harvest. Their co-op locator page is searchable by city, state and ZIP code, it's found here <http://www.localharvest.org/food-coops/>

Finally, farmers' markets are probably the best-known method of strengthening the local foodshed, and of course they're found statewide. Sometimes they're patronized by larger purchasers such as restaurants, as well as private individuals. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Agricultural Marketing Service, the number of U.S. farmers' markets increased

almost 7 percent between August 2006 and August 2008, reaching a total of almost 4,700 nationwide.

The Agricultural Marketing Service operates a Web site where you can locate farmers' markets throughout Florida (and every other U.S. state), searching by city, county or ZIP code. It's located at <http://apps.ams.usda.gov/FarmersMarkets/>. The listings include location, hours and contact information for each market.

On Aug. 1-2, 2009, the first Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises Conference will be held at Osceola Heritage Park in Kissimmee. The event will feature exhibitors, educational sessions and more. All Florida farmers and members of the general public are invited to attend. Visit the conference Web site at <http://smallfarms.ifas.ufl.edu/floridasmallfarmsconference/index.htm>. For information on conference sponsorship or being an exhibitor, contact Bob Hochmuth, 386-362-1725 or bobhoch@ufl.edu.



Photo 1 - A vendor sells bell peppers at a Gainesville farmers' market. Florida offers numerous opportunities for producers to sell their crops locally, including farmers' markets, co-ops and the Farm to School program. Photo by Tyler Jones

Photo 2 - Colorful eggplant varieties await customers at a Gainesville farmers' market. According to the USDA, the number of farmers' markets is increasing nationwide. Photo by Tyler Jones

