

Roadside Produce Stands Offer Direct-Marketing Option for Small Farms

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The roadside produce stand is one of the best-known options for small farmers looking to sell their wares directly to the public.

Although the concept is old and maybe even quaint, it can be very effective. Consumers want farm-fresh fruits and vegetables and many of them are eager to get a momentary sense of connection to a working farm.

Bradford County, in Northeast Florida, is one of the state's smaller counties in terms of geographic area and population, but our agricultural community has a strong tradition of direct marketing. Currently we have 10 roadside stands, eight of them along the busiest thoroughfare through the county, U.S. Highway 301.

We can take some lessons from these businesses that could be useful to small farmers elsewhere.

First, you don't have to operate a roadside stand to sell your crops at one. Many proprietors are eager to buy produce from other local farmers. That's especially true if you offer specialty items other local growers don't.

Second, quality is everything. Often, consumers are attracted to roadside stands because they believe they can find fresher items there than in the supermarket. So be selective and offer freshly harvested items, culling out crops with noticeable defects.

For those operating roadside stands, keep these things in mind:

- If you're a grower it may be a good idea to put the stand on your farm property. The presence of crops growing on location can help attract customers. Two of Bradford County's roadside stands are set up this way, both of them prominently displaying trophies garnered by their prize-winning strawberries.
- Consumers are looking for a pleasant experience, not just good produce. That means making sure your employees are friendly, your facilities are clean and your prices are competitive.

- Prominent signs are important, so that prospective customers know about your stand before they reach it, and recognize it when they arrive.
- Provide ample off-road parking, so that drivers can easily enter and leave your premises.
- If you're getting started, check applicable state and local laws to ensure that you comply with their requirements.
- Your county extension office can help with further tips.

Half of Bradford County's roadside stands have been open between seven and 20 years, proving that this business model can work, provided your location offers a steady flow of potential customers. According to the Florida Department of Transportation, 20,000 people see these stands every day as they pass by on U.S. Highway 301.

On Aug. 1-2, 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 are invited to attend.

Visit the Florida Small Farms and Alternative Enterprises 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.