

Project grows taps farmers markets

Michael Neary, mneary@newsleader.com 7:44 p.m. EDT May 13, 2014



(Photo: Griffin Moores/The News Leader)

Markets, traditionally, are places teeming with people seeking to buy things. Sometimes there's negotiation back and forth, and potential customers may riddle a vendor with questions about a product.

But some markets harbor an easier atmosphere. They become places where people linger and talk and open themselves up to new ideas.

Jenna Clarke, director of operations at Project Grows, said that's the sort of spirit she notices at the area's farmers markets, and it's a mood that, as she sees it, makes them good settings for the sort of educational work performed by Project Grows.

"It's been our experience that more often people at the farmers market want to hang out for a while and chat for a while," she said. "More often, they're coming to have an experience. And they love to talk about the vegetables and to ask what the vegetables are ... It's a place where we can really access the community and interact."

Project Grows, a nonprofit educational farm in Verona, is incorporating farmers markets more thoroughly into its work this year than it has before. Last year the group worked a stand at the North Augusta Farmer's Market, in Verona. This year it will manage the North Augusta Farmers' Market, continue to run a table there, and also run a table at the Waynesboro Farmers Market.

Clarke said selling produce at the markets helps to generate revenue for Project Grows — which donates about half of its produce and sells the rest, at various venues, in order to sustain its educational programs. A presence at the farmers markets also, she said, helps the group to fulfill its larger mission.

"Part that mission is educational programming, teaching kids how to grow food," she said. "The other part of that mission is access: access to local health food. So for us, it was natural to sell at the farmers market and to get more food into the community."

Susanna Byrd, marketing and outreach coordinator for Project Grows, noted a few plans that may be coming to the North Augusta Farmers' Market. That's the market Project Grows is managing. She mentioned the possibility of a kids' day and an uptick in music at the market.

She also said staff members were working on implementing the acceptance of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program benefits — also known as food stamps — at the North Augusta Farmers' Market. The markets in Staunton and Waynesboro accept SNAP.

Part of what's helped Project Grows to bring innovation to the North Augusta Farmers' Market is the presence of the Allegheny Mountain School, in Highland County, which has helped to create a network of people with knowledge of food systems. Byrd, a senior fellow at the school, was able to work with Mandy Henkler, another senior fellow at the school, to create some new programming at the market.

Henkler, who works as a nutrition fellow at the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, shares healthy and simple recipes — along with samples — at the North Augusta Farmers' Market. Sometimes her recipes will illustrate tasty uses of foods on sale there.

"I had someone try my mint tea and then go and buy a mint plant, so it worked," Henkler said.

Byrd said the presence of the school creates multitudes of possibilities for cooperative projects.

"We have this support network of people we know who are interested and active in the food movement," she said. "We definitely help each other out."

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