

# It Pays to Be Direct

Stephan Michaels

There's a small revolution quietly growing on the fertile farmlands of Jefferson County. Locally grown produce is in abundant supply thanks to a number of small farmers who are using sustainable growing practices and also employing alternative business models to market their crops. Increasingly, farmers are turning to direct marketing as a way to deliver high-quality food to consumers.

Roadside stands, farmers markets, food co-ops and home delivery are some of the more visible forms of direct marketing that eliminate the middleman between farmer and consumer. Another model that is growing in popularity is the Community Supported Agriculture program, where families and individuals subscribe to a specific farm at the beginning of the growing season. This kind of subscription service has been proven effective across Washington state, and Karyn Williams of Old Tarboo Farm in Quilcene credits the program with reducing that farm's dependence on traditional financing.

"We started the CSA program to have some money up front in the spring when we really need to buy everything and don't have any money com-



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are marketed directly through a "U-Pick" program, where people come to the farm and pick their own berries. This year on opening day, well over a hundred people showed up and harvested more than 700 pounds of berries.

"It's \$2 a pound for the U-Pick price, and it's \$3.50 a pint at the Farmers Market," says Keith Kisler. "A big savings."

That's a sizable savings for both the consumer and the farm.

"We want to stay away from doing big wholesale orders and having large picking crews to pick all the berries," Kisler explains. "The U-Pick takes a lot less management, and less labor costs."

The U-Pick component also eliminates the cost of transporting those berries to the marketplace. "Two dollars a pound is not very much relative to what we could get elsewhere," notes Kisler, "but when you start balancing it with labor costs and the infrastructure it takes to move the berries around the region, it starts to make sense."

## Asset to The Community

Theresa Beaver of the Washington State University Extension Food and Farm Network notes that small acreage farmers are savvy to eliminate the distributor as a way to boost profits. She commends Finnriver Farm for achieving that end and for also providing a valuable experience. "The return to the farm is good and the consumer gets to visit the farm. It's an addition to the community."

Three years ago, Alan Brisley and Kelly Janes of Frog Hill Farm in Port Townsend created yet a different kind of community model, when people came to work on the farm in return for vegetables and herbs. "It kind of invented itself," muses Brisley. "People had asked if they could come and work in exchange for produce. So, we started having people come on a drop-in basis. There was no formal arrangement, other than they could harvest vegetables on the day they showed up to work."

That "Work Trade" program evolved the next year and varying rates for different levels of participation were established. Frog Hill then expanded the model by including some of the participants' children.

"It was so much fun to do," Brisley smiles, "it just took off."

## An Educational Component

The work-for-food model turns to the local community as a source of labor, with significant shares of crops going directly to those consumers without being transported to market. But beyond the obvious commercial advantages, the program also fosters a strong educational element.

"Agriculture in this country, especially small-scale agriculture, is conducted in isolation from the



**Alan Brisley instructs participants at Frog Hill Farm in Port Townsend.**

*Photos by Stephan Michaels*

ing in," Williams says.

This season, 25 CSA subscribers paid Old Tarboo \$425 per share to receive a weekly assortment of certified organic produce from spring until early fall. Williams says the arrangement is a win-win scenario for both the farm and its participating members. "It's a 10% discount. By paying up front, they actually get more produce and they're supporting local agriculture," she says. "I was able to cut down our loan a lot this year."

Finnriver Farm in Chimacum Valley takes an even more direct approach to attract community support. Owners Kate Dean and Keith Kisler sell vegetable and herb starts at The Port Townsend Farmers Market and through the Port Townsend Food Co-op, but their mainstay is certified organic blueberries. The majority of pounds from the field





**Sherry Jones picks blueberries on opening day at Finnriver Farm in Chimacum.**

community," explains Brisley. "People don't really understand what's involved in producing food. This model really opens that up for people to experience what it's like to be on the land. It offers them the opportunity to learn and expose their children to what it means to grow produce," he says.

"It's quite novel," says WSU's Teresa Beaver, "and it seems very successful. It's a way to have help on the farm while also educating the community on how to grow their own food. It's extremely valuable."

Renee Baribault of Port Townsend began participating at Frog Hill this season. "The village aspect of the program is really supportive of families," she says, noting that she often brings her 2-year-old daughter Linnea with her. "It feels good to know that she's learning as much as I am."

## **Direct to The Kitchen**

Frog Hill Farm markets about a dozen crops at the Port Townsend Food Co-Op, and also sells straight to local restaurants, including Fins Coastal Cuisine in Port Townsend.

Executive Chef Doug Seaver, who also buys from Old Tarboo, says it's ideal to work with local farms. "I had always wanted to use locally grown produce," Seaver concedes, "but up until the last couple of years, it just wasn't consistent. Now that the demand is higher, small farms seem to have become more organized and dependable."

Locally grown food, especially certified

Locally grown food, especially certified organic produce, is generally more expensive than produce purchased through distributors, but Seaver says that's an acceptable trade-off.

"We were forever buying large commodity greens from big suppliers," he says, "but the shelf life was unpredictable because you didn't know when it was picked. Buying directly from local farms is economically more viable. Even though it may be more expensive by the pound, it lasts a lot longer."

Chef Seaver says it's encouraging to see small farmers thriving on the Peninsula. "There's a good feeling you get when you support the local economy, but it also goes deeper than that. It's about quality."

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