



## Potential for Farmers' Market Season Extension: Grower and Market Manager Viewpoints

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### Introduction

Direct marketing outlets, such as farmers' markets, have increased in the U.S., tripling to over 7,000 in the past 15 years (USDA, 2012). The surge in farmers' market popularity with consumers can be attributed to many benefits such as the availability of higher quality and locally produced products (Onozaka, Thilmany-McFadden, and Nurse, 2010). In addition, farmers' markets provide small-scale growers a viable distribution network for local produce, as they are relatively easy markets for small farmers to participate in due to limited contractual obligations and relatively low vendor fees (LeRoux et al., 2010; Hardesty and Leff, 2010). Direct marketing outlets are a feasible diversification strategy, as they provide additional revenues above typical wholesale levels.

Direct marketing presents a new set of complex choices for producers. The use of season extension techniques in fresh produce production are an important response to low revenues, a short marketing season and product availability (Conner et al., 2011). Season extensions allow producers to increase their production sales season by lengthening the growing season. For example, techniques such as high tunnels have been shown to

lengthen production periods, increase yields (Gatzke et al., 2009; Rowley et al., 2010) and improve profitability (Ward et al., 2011) in the Rocky Mountain region. Studies have shown that farmers' market revenue can increase three-fold when operating 7 months or longer compared to markets operating for 5 months or less (Ragland and Tropp, 2009). Hence, direct markets represent an important source of income, but the availability of direct marketing outlets during extended or nontraditional seasons, as well as the establishment of price premiums to support the additional capital investment needed for season extension are equally important concerns (Curtis and Yeager, 2012).



This fact sheet provides an overview of the potential for extended season farmers' markets. Using data from farmers' market vendor and manager surveys conducted in the fall of 2011 in Nevada, Utah, and Idaho, this publication presents both the grower and farmers' market manager perspectives related to production potential, as well as the perceived costs and benefits of extending the farmers' market season.

## Data Collection and Outcomes

Data was collected from 57 growers and 18 farmers' market managers through the online surveys. The majority of the grower respondents owned a small farm with 54% working on one acre or less. Sixty-percent of grower respondents reported having 3 or more years of direct marketing experience, and 37% reported having less than 3 years of direct marketing experience. Growers primarily use natural, organic or locally produced labeling as their top three marketing strategies during the normal growing season. The majority of growers (91%) use farmers' markets as their primary distribution outlet and 35% relied exclusively on farmers' markets. According to the survey results, the top three produce items offered by local growers at farmers' markets were vegetables (35%), fruits (26%), and greens (24%).

The farmers' market managers reported that over 80% of their markets consist of 50 or less vendors at each market. Sixty-eight percent of the markets are open for less than 6 months each year and only 5% are open for 7 months or longer. Thus, in order for season extension to be viable, market managers must investigate consumer demand and the availability of market facilities while farmers must assess the potential costs and benefits of using season extension growing techniques.

## Views of Produce Growers

In order to extend a growing season, growers must find ways to grow produce during the colder months. Grower respondents in this season extension study indicated that 60% have adopted some season production extension techniques, such as frost cloth and high tunnels, and are looking for extended season outlets through which to market

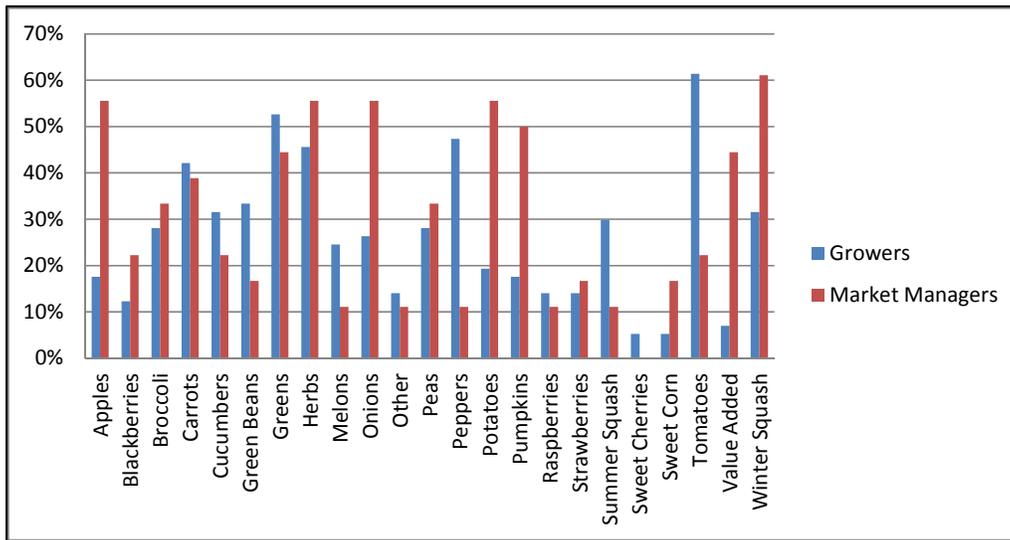
their produce. The survey reported that 33% of growers do not use any season extension techniques, but that 39% of these growers were planning to implement techniques in the future. Expense (35%), lack of information (16%), lack of previous experience (16%), and unknown distributors (16%) were rated as the main barriers for local growers adopting season extension techniques.

Grower respondents recognized that the short farmers' market season (on average less than 6 months) was limiting growers' revenue opportunities. Fifty-two percent of the sample respondents were interested in a season length of 6 months or less, 12% of the respondents would consider extending the season to 7 months, and 15% desired a season more than 7 months in length (see Figure 1). Hence, the number of available vendors required for a cost effective extended season market will likely vary across locations and may not always be sufficient.



**Figure 1.** Grower preferred market season length.

As season extension depends on the availability of produce and value-added goods in the off-season, the survey asked grower respondents what possible products they could provide during an extended season. These products are illustrated in Figure 2. Tomatoes, greens, peppers, and herbs, which are popular items sold during the normal growing season, were selected for production during an extended season. Growers expected to receive a premium by providing such items during the off-season. However, less than half of the growers were actually receiving higher prices if currently producing during the extended season.



**Figure 2.** Potential extended season products.

### Views of Farmers’ Market Managers

Farmers’ market managers are a key factor in selecting farmers’ market locations, dates and timing. According to the manager survey results, 68% of farmers’ markets were open for less than 6 months and only 5% were open for 7 months or longer. Market managers were asked to provide the attributes that they believed encouraged price premiums during extended seasons. Market managers reported that potential premiums may exist for product availability (67%), organic and local products (61%), and naturally produced products (57%).

Managers were asked whether they would consider extending their season. Thirty-nine percent of them responded “yes” and 50% felt vendors wanted to extend the market season. Half of the managers surveyed would consider moving indoors in an extended season to accommodate customer preferences even though operation costs may rise. Table 1 shows the responses for selected attitudinal questions posed to market managers.

Farmers’ market managers believed that vendors could provide winter squash, greens, apples, onions, potatoes, pumpkins, herbs, and carrots in the extended season.

**Table 1: Attitudes toward Season Extension**

Question	Yes	N/A
Are you considering extending your farmers’ market season?	39%	5%
Do produce vendors want to use your market in an extended season?	50%	11%
Would consumers prefer shopping indoors in an extended season?	61%	11%
Will extending require moving indoors?	44%	12%
Do you have a suitable location identified for the extended season?	28%	28%
Is there a significant expense involved in securing a suitable extended season location?	67%	28%
Are customers willing to pay higher prices in an extended season?	22%	17%

Managers thought that berries and warm-season produce, such as tomatoes and peppers, would be difficult to grow during the extended season (22%), which contradicts the results of the grower’s survey. Figure 2 illustrates a comparison between the opinions of the growers and the farmers’ market managers regarding the potential products for the extended season. These discrepancies may imply a

lack of communication between these two groups, manager opinions of consumer demand versus grower capability, or lack of production knowledge on the part of managers.

## Conclusions

In order to extend a growing season, growers must find ways to grow produce during the colder months and shorter days. Grower survey results indicated that more than half of the grower respondents have adopted some season production extension techniques, such as frost cloth and high tunnels. However, only 39% of the growers not currently using these techniques are interested in using them in the future. The produce that local growers would like to offer include the many of same types of produce offered in a regular season. As 91% of the grower respondents utilized farmers' markets as their primary outlet, extending farmers' markets may be the preferred method for extended season sales. However, if farmers' markets are not available fall, winter, or early spring community supported agriculture (CSA) programs are another viable option.

Additionally, farmers' market manager survey results suggest that a typical farmers' market contains 50 or fewer produce vendors and is open for less than six months. If an extended season market is offered to the public, most market managers would need to move their markets indoors to meet customer preferences, which would lead to increased market expenses. Such expenses may require higher vendor fees, which may or may not be offset by improved product pricing in the off season.

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