



Michael Gehman's company, Farmstead Foods, serves as a go-between for market gardeners and chefs. He works with 24 other growers to produce everything from sweet potatoes (above) to kale (above right) and specialty peppers.



## Veggie Hub Builds Sales For Market Gardeners

Michael Gehman gets better prices for his vegetables by marketing them with more than 20 other independent growers. Gehman is an aggregator, serving as a go-between for market gardeners and chefs.

"I started out growing for farmers markets in the St. Louis area in 2009, and I didn't even break even the first year," says Gehman. "The next year I started a CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) operation and started supplying a few chefs who liked what we could bring them."

For the next few years he concentrated on the CSA and selling at 3 farmers markets. He realized he was putting in twice as many hours and earning half as much as he did in his previous career in landscaping.

"I started reaching out to chefs, but we only grew 10 items, and they used 100 items," says Gehman. "They were interested, but frustrated trying to use local products. If the grower they worked with had a crop failure, they had to find someone else or stop using local produce."

When another market gardener with a chef customer base decided to quit, Gehman bought him out. "We doubled our clientele overnight," he recalls.

The problem of providing what the chefs needed continued. Gehman turned the farm side of the business over to his brother and decided to concentrate on the wholesale side. He also brought other growers into the effort, coordinating with them and the chefs on what would be in demand. He stopped selling under the family's Double Star Farms and began marketing under Farmstead Foods as a representative of the group.

"We now work with 24 other growers," says Gehman. "We are a pipeline for them to the wholesale market. We meet with the farmers each winter to discuss what they plan to grow and then meet with the chefs to tell them what farmers in the area will have."

Farmstead Foods has gone far beyond just vegetables. Gehman will work with anything local, including dairy, eggs and meat and not just fresh. Other products include herbs, mushrooms and even wood for smokers.

"We have folks who do great canned

goods, and we try to get our produce into their canneries," says Gehman. "It bolsters our product line and gives us more we can offer our clients. In addition, we are always playing around with new crops and those that can be grown year-round in the greenhouse or stored. We share what we learn with the other growers, so they don't have to experiment."

With the increased production from other farmers and better coordination, Farmstead Foods has expanded beyond the St. Louis area. Gehman now covers most of southern Illinois and north into central Illinois. While the main focus is on chefs, he is also working with some small food markets and a group that works with a larger food distributor.

He is expanding beyond the traditional definition of local as well. Products offered by Farmstead Foods now include citrus fruit from small growers around Bakersfield, Calif., and olive oil from small farms on the island of Crete.

"The more we can do, the more people look at us as the place to go," says Gehman. "We are proceeding with caution to find small farmers in other areas who grow things we can't grow here."

What hasn't changed is identifying the food source to the chefs and their customers. "Even when using sources outside our home area, we give credit to the farmers who grow the food," says Gehman.

Gehman encourages other market gardeners to try developing a similar marketing hub. He does warn against distributors or restaurants that use local growers to "greenwash" their business.

He suggests growers reach out and build solid connections with others doing sales. "Make sure they have local small farmers' interests in mind," says Gehman. "Sit down with the managers and chefs of local restaurants and explain what you do. Go through a seed catalog with them and find out what they have a hard time getting from food service distributors. Then you might later be able to sell them your tomatoes and potatoes."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Farmstead Foods, 16182 Mount Zion Rd., Benton, Ill. 62812 (ph 618 218-4840; sales@doublestarfarms.com; www.farmsteadfoods.com).

## "Mr. Popcorn" Sells More Than 200 Popcorn Flavors

"I look at everyday food and ask, 'Why can't I put that flavor into popcorn?'" explains Scott Trimble when asked how he managed to come up with more than 200 flavors of popcorn. Some of the unique flavors he offers include frosted lemon cookie, minty shamrock, taco supreme and Pub Grub. He and his crew do everything, from planting the seed to popping and selling the finished flavored popcorn.

Trimble got started as a boy, growing his own popcorn and making caramel corn in a brown paper bag. At first he gave it away, then slowly built a business when people started asking where they could buy it. He saved money to buy a cabinet popcorn popper and rented space in a certified kitchen before investing in a building in Heyworth, Ill., in 2016.

"Now we have the biggest popcorn popper in the region. It pops 2 1/2 lbs. of kernels for each batch, so we can make 175 lbs. of popped corn an hour," Trimble says. He cooks up his flavorings on a commercial stove.

"Temperature is critical. The whole art of making caramel is just the controlled burning of sugar," he says. "Change the temperature 5 degrees and it crunches and tastes different."

Once it's at the right temperature, the syrup is poured over the popcorn in a 40-gal. barrel that turns slowly as he mixes it by hand before laying it out to cool to room temperature before bagging.

He grows hull-less varieties and buys butter from a family farm and sugar from a farmer-owned sugar plant. He plants six varieties each year, including blue and black popcorn.

Trimble offers six staple flavors - Buttery Caramel Corn, Cheddar Cheese, Big City



Scott Trimble plants 6 varieties of popcorn each year, pops it, and then cooks up different flavorings.



Mix (Caramel, Cheddar & White Cheddar mix), Pub Grub (Spicy Caramel, Salted Bavarian Pretzel, Beer Cheese & Bacon Cheddar), Frosted Kettle Corn, and Movie Theater Butter Corn.

He sells small (\$4/quart) and large (\$10/gallon) bags at his store and through many other stores, including most Hy-Vee stores in Illinois. He also sells through Facebook and Twitter and plans to have a website soon.

"Schools use it for fundraisers," he says. "The nice thing about it is they actually make money. The organization is helped, and I get new customers."

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Trimble Produce Farm, 101 W. Main, Heyworth, Ill. 61745 (ph 217 202-2994; Facebook: Trimble Plants and Produce; trimbleplantsandproduce@yahoo.com).

## Ranch Couple Buys Captured Feral Hogs

"Feral hogs are a big problem that's just getting bigger, and we're doing our part to hold down the numbers by purchasing live animals from people who trap them," says Wade Griffin who, along with his wife Taylor, operates Circle G Farms, which was established by Wade's grandparents. They're the only licensed buyers in the east Texas area of Bowie County and are carrying on a family tradition.

"We'll buy any quantity from a single hog up to a full trailer load as long as we're not exceeding our license housing limit," Taylor says. They weigh the animals on a certified scale and price them according to their age and weight. "Earlier this year a fellow brought in a trailer load that weighed just over 1,400 lbs, which paid him just over \$300. That's a nice income from one trap in one evening," Taylor says.

Hogs that the Griffins buy are held in pens away from their farm site. "The pigs are very wild, so we keep them sorted by size and penned in a wild area so they don't become stressed, or they might die," Wade says. Their state license lets them hold animals no longer than 7 days and have 200 in possession.

The couple markets 80 to 100 feral hogs at a time to a certified wild animal processing facility that's 6 1/2 hrs. away near San Antonio. "The facility tests every animal to make sure it's disease-free," Taylor says. "They process meat cuts for export and many other parts of the animal are used in the medical field for wound healing, plastic surgery, sutures and different types



Circle G Farms purchases feral hogs from people who trap them, then sells the hogs to a wild animal processing facility.

of medical research. Meat and body parts not fit for human use such as hides, hooves, ears, feet and bones are used for pet food and pet chewing products."

Those efforts have produced a customer base that now extends in a 300-mile radius of their farm and continues to grow. "The feral hogs aren't going away, we know that for sure," says Taylor. They're also working on plans to open a certified wild animal processing facility in Mt. Pleasant, much closer to their farm.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Circle G Farms and Hog Buying Facility, 23 Cr 4217, Simms, Texas 75574 (ph 903 293-9774; twacasey@yahoo.com).