



## Should Your Garden Center Include a Farmers' Market?

Kara Kading, a third-generation family member and manager at Milaegeer's in Wisconsin, has run a successful farmers' market at the garden center since 2014.

By Teresa McPherson

### How and when did the market get started?

We started in November 2014. It had been a dream of mine to have a farmers market in the greenhouse for years. A friend of mine gave me a connection of someone who ran a local farmers market here in Burlington, Carol Reed. I contacted her, we sat down, and we got along so well right from the start — we both had a passion for local food and supporting small businesses and farmers.

Her farmers market was winding down (we met in September 2014) and we agreed we should start right away. In November, our greenhouse would be empty and we would have the space for vendors. Vendors would be done with their summer markets and available to be at the market. And customers would be excited to have a place to go in the winter to connect with local farmers and entertain their families with free activities and live music. Everything fell into place and we started off strong from the very beginning!

### What does the market include?

We offer a beautiful mix of everything here — honey, artisan breads, granola, sauces and seasonings, olive oil, cheese, coffee, soups, salsas, kettle corn, local produce, natural dog treats, local artisans, fresh lettuce and microgreens from our greenhouse, mushrooms, eggs, meat, fish, local craft beer on tap (changes weekly), a bloody mary bar (our market is on a Sunday so the bloody

mary bar has been a good fit!), prepared foods, and professional knife sharpening.

### How has it changed over the years?

People really enjoy and plan on spending the day at the market. It has really become a community gathering, where people come and get their products and then sit and visit and listen to the live music by the firepits and enjoy Sunday with family and friends.

Our Facebook page has a very loyal following with over 13,000 followers who love to see what's happening at the market. We always have fun events planned and coordinate with our own store and greenhouses for what events we can offer. This year, we just started incorporating our usual workshops that we offer at the store into the farmers' market. So, this Sunday we will have a terrarium workshop offered in the morning. Next week it's an orchid show tied in to the market. In April, we will have a spring garden bowl workshop and, of course, the Easter Bunny will be coming to the market!

### Why do you think it has been successful?

We had a strong belief in it from the beginning. Our market manager, Carol Reed, and our family were all excited and passionate. We shared our enthusiasm and excitement with others, and the excitement and passion became contagious.

Our vendors say that our market is like no other; they feel like family when they are at the market. We always have



their best interest at heart. We support them, promote them, and encourage them to grow and connect with customers.

We keep the market fresh with fun events for the whole family. The market is offered year-round so it is consistent for people and it becomes part of their weekly routine. We always have new vendors at the market and encourage variety so that our returning customers always have something new to see and support.

### What advice would you give to garden centers considering adding a farmers' market?

Research your area to see if there is a need for a farmers' market. When we started, there was a demand for a larger, more consistent farmers market in our city. We also scheduled our market to be on Sundays instead of Saturdays to not conflict with existing larger markets that were in neighboring cities.

It takes a lot of time and effort to be creative with events, to find new vendors,

### COVID-19 Update

Currently, we are offering as many options that we can so that everyone feels safe and comfortable. We provide weekly online ordering for our customers and they can pick up out in our parking lot from participating vendors.

We also have extra product there (lettuce, arugula, microgreens, eggs and mushrooms) for people who didn't have a chance to order or don't know how to do online.

We are allowing vendors to set up their tents and sell their products out in the parking lot for the first time. It's just a limited number — there are about five of them. We are going to space them far apart and they will have their car parked next to the tent so they can stay warm in between customers!

We found that people either came up to the tent and picked up their order or they did like a farmers' market drive-through, where they drove past the tent, gave us their order and we brought it to their car. All online pre-orders were already paid for; it was super easy for them to pick up and be on their way.

We continue to adapt daily but for now, this is what's working best for The Great Lakes Farmers Market.

—Kara Kading, April 8, 2020



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and a diligent person to stay on top of vendor fees, licensing, and market rules to make sure all vendors are adhering to those regulations. Before we started the market, I had talked with several vendors to see if they had an interest in starting the farmers market with me. We made sure that we had the variety of what people needed so that it was a one-stop shop at the farmers' market.

Do you have the space to have a market — for vendors and places for patrons to sit and enjoy the experience? Also consider parking — is the market easily accessible?

### What are some things you tried with the market that didn't end up working?

Some events seemed to just get lost in the shuffle — we tried books swaps, puzzle swaps, share what you don't wear, bike swaps — those seemed to be too much for people to participate in. But anytime we do a food drive or coat drive, etc., people really enjoy helping and supporting the community that way.

We tried promoting and doing a vendor spotlight each week and that vendor would offer a weekly special, but again, it seemed to get lost in the shuffle and never really took off. You just don't know until you give it a shot — and thankfully, our vendors have supported our ideas and know that sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't, but we're always up for trying new things. It's important to keep it fresh but have a healthy balance of new ideas and not overwhelming them with too much information. 🌱



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