

Let me explain...

...why hosting a farmers market in the dead of winter makes business sense for Russell's Garden Center.

By Peg Mallet



A farmers market at Russell's Garden Center was a long time dream of third generation owner, Lewis Russell. He and the Russell family politely waited until a local farm stand closed before giving the nod to initiate The Wayland Farmers Market at Russell's Garden Center in 2005. The original summer market will start its seventh season this June, 2011.

When the Wayland market began in 2005, there were 140 seasonal farmers markets throughout the state of Massachusetts. Now there are 230, with many towns hoping to start their own market in the near future. Winter farmers markets, on the other hand, are still a rare breed, with less than two dozen operating weekly after January 1.

A year and a half ago we posed the possibility of having a winter market on Saturdays starting after our very busy Christmas season. I got on the phone and spoke to lots of farmers. Many were at the end of a very long season, and were ready for a well-deserved rest. Others said that they might be interested for the following year, but weren't yet prepared for the upcoming season. Once three said, "Yes," I knew we had a market. One grows greens under high tunnels, another specializes in root crops and the third grows hydroponically.

Finding specialty food vendors with non-perishable food to fill out the market was easy, as those used to the weekly grind of the summer season were ready to jump back in. They missed the camaraderie of the other vendors and the direct interaction with the customers. These local vendors brought in everything from their own cheeses and maple syrup to root beer and jam.

Farmers markets offer shoppers the unique and entertaining experience of meeting the person who has produced the food they are buying. If the shopper has a question about how something was grown, they will get an immediate answer! Customers form bonds through these interactions. For example, on a Saturday last month, I watched two different shoppers hand two different farmers ten dollar bills, saying, "I owe you this from last week, thank you!" You probably won't witness that at your local big box store.

Originally located in the store's front parking lot to maximize visibility, the summer market at Russell's relocated last year to the back of the garden center, which resulted in a quieter setting that encouraged customers to linger as they shopped and stay for lunch. Our summer market runs weekly from the end of June through the middle of October on Wednesdays and has about 15 vendors, four of which are vegetable/fruit farms.

Heating up the Greenhouse

During the winter, the greenhouses are a

wonderful backdrop for the market, providing warmth, plants and the illusion of a tropical setting. In our second year, we lengthened the hours due to popular demand, and invited three vendors with gourmet lunch foods, which are also available for take out. Scattering seating areas throughout the greenhouse, we have made the Winter Market a destination, while introducing people from the community to a farmers market, some for the first time.

Expenses are higher in the winter. Parking is always an issue. Every Saturday the parking lot fills with cars, often before the market officially opens. On the weeks when we have special market events, Massachusetts Farm Wineries Day and Wool Days, there is not enough parking for everyone. This winter, weather has been a big factor in terms of expense. Continuous snowstorms with considerable accumulation for the first five weeks of the market were unexpected. Normally there would not be a need for such thorough snow removal if we weren't expecting the crowds. Heating costs are also greater because we open an additional greenhouse on market day.

A Worth Beyond Revenue

Is it worth it from a sales point of view? It's safe to say that foot traffic has increased exponentially and the market brings people to the store from long distances who had never heard of us before. Store revenues, while more than we had experienced in the winters prior to the indoor market, have not increased past the first year of the market's operation. Our hope is that we are introducing new shoppers to our store and that they will return as customers of Russell's Garden Center, based on their memory of all the inviting products they saw when they came to the market.

The rewards of having a market go beyond revenues. Russell's Garden Center, which was started in 1876 and is currently run by the fourth generation of the Russell family, is seen as a generous supporter of the community because we host the farmers market. Not a week goes by without hearing positive comments, either by word of mouth or online, from customers who are glad to have a centralized place to shop for locally grown and produced food products. And they always remark on the atmosphere of shopping in a festive, plant-filled, green environment. ☺

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