



Are you a serious year-round hobbyist grower who dreams of becoming a commercial farmer? You'll need all the help you can get. Tips to help you build a business

GROWING for Local Markets

By Barbara Berst Adams

Near Custer, Wash., Kirk and Jeri Hayes operate DEVine Gardens, a hydroponic farm and nursery. They started the farm to supply locals with vegetables year-round. Local newspapers carried notices about DEVine Gardens right before their grand opening in the winter of 2006, describing the farm as a place for hydroponic education as well as alternative food and energy production. "There is never too much information out there on small local farmers working with and for their community," Kirk said.

Kirk and Jeri are taking advantage of the

public's insatiable interest in all things food to market their farm and crops to local consumers, who, like foodies everywhere, increasingly want to commune with farmers. Agritourism—fun on the farm for city folk—is considered part of the new eco-tourism trend. Agritourism activities can include on-farm retail outlets, farm tours, and hydroponics workshops. Twin Pine Farm is owned by the Hogle family near St. Paul, Minn. The Hogles grow hydroponic gourmet produce year-round for their local community. They have high standards for their produce, and embrace organic values and sustainable growing

methods. Customers can stroll through the greenhouse, and Gary Hogle also arranges individual and group tours of the greenhouses.

If you don't have time to conduct greenhouse tours, think up something else that might work better for you. Whipple Hollow Farm produces hydroponic tomatoes in West Rutland, Vt. The 67-acre farm is owned by Barry and Joanna Roche, who built their greenhouses in 1993. They use no harmful pesticides or chemicals, and distribute their crops to grocery stores and through their on-farm retail outlet, which is open Monday through Saturday, year-round.

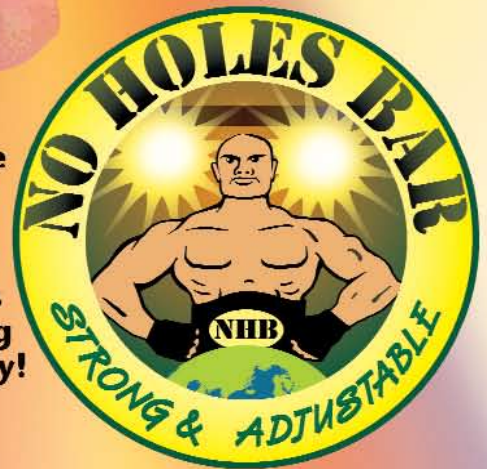


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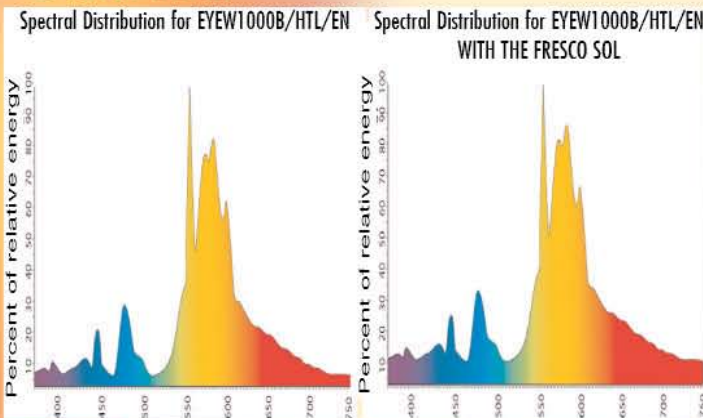
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“We have a sales area and growing demonstration in our packing and office building on the farm,” Barry said. “We restrict access to our greenhouses for bio-security reasons.”

Reach Out

Check with your local Chamber of Commerce to see if there are local or regional activities such as garden tours you could plug into which would bring you free exposure. For example, on secluded Lummi Island, Wash., Tree Frog Farm combines greenhouse-grown products with outdoor native landscape plants grown on their tiny one-third-acre farm. Traditionally, Lummi Island artist residents advertise a twice yearly open art studio tour day as a way to bring awareness to their artistic products. The island's few farms also join in this tour, including Tree Frog Farm, and are listed on the self-guided tour map.

The farmers spiff up their grounds and spend the day talking with visitors, often selling some products and gaining new future customers along the way. As another example, Whipple Hollow Farm is one of the named stop-off points for an annual regional bicycle tour.

Jane Eckert, farm marketing consultant, believes that a connection to the farmer is one of the main draws for farm customers. It's how businesses can generate and retain loyal customers and more word-of-mouth promotion. Inviting others to tour your farm accomplishes this; so does going out into the community with your products and knowledge. The owners of Tree Frog Farm periodically set up booths at health fairs and other public gatherings.

Food Connection

Local chefs are another possible market outlet where one-on-one relationships offer advantages. There is a growing trend for chefs to offer meals that include local farm ingredients, even naming the farm on restaurant menus. Smaller farms have marketed to chefs by offering yearly chef open houses, listing their farms in chef/farm directories and even agreeing to grow exclusive crops for specific chefs.

Keep in mind, though, that some chefs and their customers who may prefer to eat

in-season crops. Discover what your local chefs are looking for, and see if you can offer it.

Or consider creating and marketing an “artisan” foods. These are specially prepared foods, usually made in small batches often with locally grown ingredients. You may find customers beating a path to your door if you can create and deliver a one-of-a-kind product from your farm's produce, such as flavored vinegars or salsa.

Local specialty crops go along with the trend to promote local uniqueness. Do you grow any crops—tomatoes, herbs or lettuce—that are unique to your geographic location or that have a special history, such as a tomato variety that was bred at your local university? Do you grow herbs or flower varieties that are native or have a local history to tell?

Add Sources of Income

One strategy calls for adding one or more businesses to the current growing venture. It could mean, for example, blending hydroponics with outdoor farming, such as raising grass-fed laying hens or sheep that produce wool for handspinners. Twin Pine Farm owners offer value-added products such as dried herbs and vegetables grown from their farm, but they also sell imported food products and products made by other farms. If you go this route, just make sure the other income-producing venture you add synergizes, rather than scatters, your efforts.

Local and Sustainable: The Next Organic

You may have heard someone say, “The next organic is local and sustainable.” People have come to realize that sustainable agriculture involves much more than growing crops without toxic pesticides. To be considered sustainable, an agricultural system should, among other things, strive to:

- Use earth-friendly growing solutions such as releasing beneficial insects and other alternative pest-control methods, recycling water, etc.
- Buy locally and sell locally, thereby contributing to the local economy.
- Support plant diversity and independent seed companies by growing open-pollinated or heirloom varieties.

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- Use bio-friendly and recycled products.
- Use “green” power.
- Donate a portion of the harvest to a local food bank.
- Hire and train local workers.

Hydroponics growers have a great window of opportunity here, because they are often among the first to adopt sustainable agriculture practices. You may have already adopted some or all of these. If so, tell your customers all about it. Chances are most of them will continue to support you for your progressive growing practices.

Selling Hydroponics

Of course, hydroponics has long battled a stigma—that it's the sole province of underground growers intent of producing evil crops. But you, as a successful year-round grower, can tell a more complete story. You can show the public how hydroponics allows growers to grow more crops in less space with fewer resources. How it can provide consumers with exotic or off-season crops that would otherwise have to be shipped thousands of miles to market. And how it's conceivable that someday hydroponics will be utilized to grow large volumes of food sustainably. And, as a result, more cropland will be available for soil and wildlife conservation activities and good old open space.

It seems that when hydroponics is promoted as a partner in our efforts to build a sustainable and prosperous future, new doors of acceptance and possibility are open.

Barbara Berst Adams (www.MicroEco-Farming.com) is author of “Micro Eco-Farming: Prospering from Backyard to Small Acreage in Partnership with the Earth” (New World Publishing). She and her husband own Island Meadow Farm in Washington.

Resources

Jane Eckert/Eckert AgriMarketing
www.farmstop.com
www.localharvest.com
www.chefscollaborative.org
www.farmerchefconnection.org
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www.agritourismworld.com
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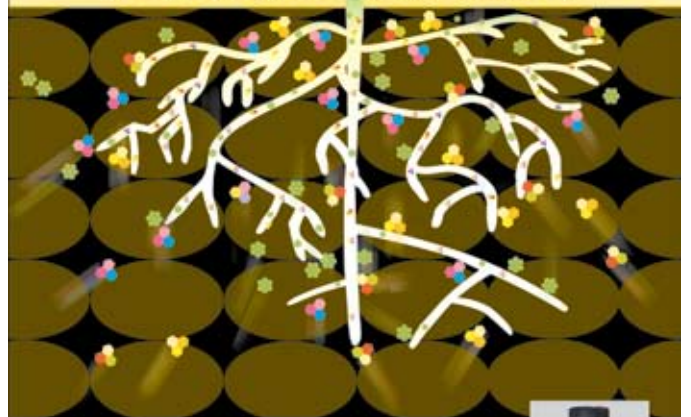
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