

Depending on the amount of produce you plant, there are several options you should consider in our area. If you like to plant, but hate to harvest, a pick-your-own or u-pick-em operation maybe the best choice for you and your family. From the stand-point of a farmer, this type of operation provides income and eliminates the hiring of seasonal help which can be difficult to find. It also frees up time for the farmer by eliminating harvesting and transporting.

Successful you-pick-ems offer an “experience” that includes interaction with the farmer. Visitors want to know about the planting process and the chemicals applied. They also may need harvesting lessons.

Community-supported agriculture or CSA's as they are commonly referred to can be found seasonally in many parts of our state. These growers sometimes operate independently or several growers form a small network. Produce buyers become CSA members or subscribers and share the economic risks and benefits of food production. An agreed upon sum between the parties provides the member with fresh produce on a pre-determined basis: weekly, bi-weekly or monthly. Once the produce is ready for harvest, members are notified and begin receiving their share.

Some growers deliver a box or container to each member or members travel to the farm to pick up their share. Either way, members receive a variety of offerings from the farm.

Farmers markets are good choices for small acreage farmers, growers who want to test their product line and for those who enjoy growing fruits and vegetables and need a supplemental income. Farmers markets offer minimal marketing start-up costs, exemption from standard packing regulations, higher sale price when compared to wholesale, immediate feedback and little need for advertising.

A farmers market is a very competitive place. To succeed in such a competitive market one must find their niche. Specializing in a particular vegetable or fruit may distinguish your booth from others. Determining what is not available in the current market may also give you a competitive edge if you can find the missing link and offer it at your booth. When determining what you will offer, consider crops and products that offer diversity: organic or value-added. Constantly try to introduce new products. Perhaps cater to ethnic group's needs. Having a continuous supply during the growing season will also win loyal customers.

Offer fresh products like tree ripened or vine ripened fruit, heirloom varieties, varied lettuce mixes, herbs or fresh flowers. These have proven to be popular at markets.

Finally, don't forget about Louisiana's new opportunity to market online. Available in Louisiana and other states is an online tool that connects producers and consumers. More than 150 Louisiana producers are registered, along with 145 farmers markets and roadside stands. The website also can be useful for consumers, including individuals, restaurants and retail stores, who are seeking produce, meat, dairy products, seafood, farmers markets, roadside stands, grocery stores and restaurants. The service is free and you can link your Facebook or website to your entry.

For more information on this subject, contact: Dora Ann Hatch, LSU AgCenter Agritourism Coordinator.