

Resource Workshop Held For Farmers' Markets

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Horror stories of unsafe food and numerous health issues attributed to food consumption are driving individuals and families across the country to find home-grown food stuffs whether they are garden vegetables or meat products.

The demand for local food is growing and in order to create more resources for consumers to find local food sources, the Northeast Nebraska Resource Conservation & Development Council (RC&D) of Plainview offered a workshop last week at the Corps of Discovery Welcome Center on Hwy 81.

The "Farmers' Market Moms Resources & Assistance Workshop" provided an afternoon's worth of information about the program which promotes family gardening projects and encourages participation in local farmers' markets.

Speaking during the afternoon was Billene Nemecek who managed the Haymarket in Lincoln from 1986-2000. Today she heads the "Buy Fresh Buy Local" program in Nebraska.

Pat Garrity, the program coordinator of South Dakota's "Buy Fresh Buy Local" program, spoke of the success they are seeing and his experiences and leadership with the Floyd Boulevard Market in Sioux

City, IA.

Both individuals described the transition happening in farmers' markets.

A survey completed in 2001 by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln indicated the interest in local food opportunities is strong. Consumers are also willing to spend more for food when they know it is grown locally. An awareness is spreading in the United States, and sustainable agriculture and rural residents could be the big winners.

"Buying local food keeps farmers on the farm," said Nemecek. Typically today, food on a consumer's table travels anywhere from a minimum of 1,500 up to 2,500 miles from the farm. Nutrients are lost and fossil fuel consumption grows. Nemecek added that buying local food also sustains farm land from one generation to the next.

Nemecek listed several reasons why consumers are willing to buy local and buy fresh. The first on the list is superior flavor and freshness. Farmers' Markets offer a diversity of fresh food stuffs and many items not found in a grocery store. Ethnic foods are more readily available and home-grown meat with the flavor consumers remember from their childhood is very popular.

"People are learning what you eat is what you are," said Nemecek. "A family working together in a gar-

dening project will be a healthier family." They will learn about nutrition together and build healthy communities also she said.

Consumers today are learning about healthy environment and growing their own food in healthy soil is appealing to more and more people. Nemecek said there are consumers who carry 'I care where my food comes from' cards and leave them at restaurants who do not support local farmers.

"We have to take care of what we have; work together to preserve what we have," said Nemecek.

Garrity described local foods as food stuffs produced within 100 miles of where the consumer lives. It is generally artisanal or manually grown rather than in an industrial process. Meat will be harvested from animals which live in humane conditions and often call a pasture home.

"Actually metropolitan areas have grasped this idea already; almost five years ago," said Garrity. In the bigger cities, 5-7 percent of food purchased is bought at local farmers' markets. The need for many regional local food coops is growing and farmers interested in undertaking this new career needs to grow also.

"We need to interest young people," said Garrity. "Our industry is dying." A survey of the crowd attending the workshop showed the majority participating

was over 55-years-old. Only a handful of young individuals were there.

"We are only asking people to spend their real dollars in a different venue," said Garrity.

So Garrity sees a need for improved marketing and education, education, education. A cook in a food service company told him they haven't cooked from scratch since 1972. A partnership with other food-conscious organizations will have to happen.

Developing local farmers' markets will need cooperation from someone who can be the CEO, another will help with accounting and still another will know various marketing options. Standards and rules will help the market members and coops capitalize on strengths in the community.

Yankton has a community garden and found many successes in its first year. Todd Larson, director of the Parks and Recreation Dept. in Yankton, is very pleased with the initial gar-

dening season. The Healthy Yankton organization was able to fund some of the project with the City of Yankton offering aid as well.

"I see an ongoing cycle," said Larson. "The gardeners made their plots a destination and it was a neat experience." Now he knows there are several Yankton residents eating healthier and he watched the community garden become a place for socialization. It was also a boost for economic development in the area as well.

"The city incorporated the community garden with a dog park and I saw many families come to work in the garden and also play with their dogs," said Larson. And the gardeners became neighbors. It was a neat aspect and the quality of life improved for many people.

The project created 96 gardening plots which were 12 ft. x 18 ft., and 52 plots were rented out. Water was made available and there were rules for the partici-

pants. There was a partnership with the master gardeners group last year and he hopes to involve some youth groups this year. Larson expects all the plots to be rented this year.

Another goal he has for Yankton is to unite the two current farmers' market groups; the one in downtown Yankton and the one at the Yankton Mall.

"I see Riverside Park as a unique and exciting place for a farmers' market," said Larson. "We have this valuable area and it would be great to tie all the sellers together in an open air market with a European theme."

The workshop was just a gardening tool; one which will hopefully encourage more individuals and families to start a garden; and also offer ideas for those who wish to become vendors in a marketing coop. The Farmers' Market Moms program is eager to educate the consumer, encourage the grower and increase the marketing of healthy food.

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