





The Columbus County Community Farmers Market **Keeping it Close to Home**

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The Columbus County Community Farmers Market – with an emphasis on “*Community*” – has come to epitomize what an institution dedicated to promoting local entrepreneurship can be all about. Now entering its tenth season, the market has found its success through a combination of diligence, enterprise and never losing sight of what it’s all about.

‘That was the market’

The Columbus County Community Farmers Market was established in 1998 in a downtown Whiteville parking lot. It was initiated by what former county commissioner and farmers market consultant Kip Godwin says was a small group of farmers who “as the government was reducing quota, and recognizing the potential of a buyout, said, ‘We want to get into growing some garden vegetables and fruit and start a tailgate market.’”

And so they did just that.

In 1999, the market received a \$10,000 grant from the Rural Advancement Foundation International (RAFI) and continued to expand operations in that downtown location, with growers arriving and selling off the tailgates of their trucks.

“They did pretty well,” says Godwin, “and then they started looking for someplace where they could have a shelter.”

In January 2001, the North Carolina secretary of state incorporated the organization, and that same year the market relocated to a temporary shelter near the Cooperative Extension Service and Columbus County Department of Social Services buildings.

“So they bought [a temporary shelter],” Godwin says, “and then they bought a second one. And the farmers would come on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from 7:00 to noon, and they would back up beside that little carport and set them up a table – some of them would still sell right out of their trucks. And that was the market.”

A permanent home

Two grants from the North Carolina Tobacco Trust Fund Commission, in 2002 and 2003, occasioned the next solid step forward for the market, with the construction of the new structure in which it now resides.

Planning for the construction began in mid-2002, at which time the market board applied for and received its first TTFC grant. Site preparation and construction began in 2003. Additional TTFC funds were secured that same year in order to complete the project. The market relocated to its new site in 2005.

The Columbus County Community Farmers Market is now housed in a permanent 60’x120’ open-air shelter with a concrete floor. This facility provides ample parking, 20 vendor spaces, electricity and public restrooms, and offers an opportunity for local folks to buy a greater variety of produce grown not only in Columbus County but in Bladen, Robeson and Brunswick counties as well.



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A local thing

The Columbus County Community Farmers Market is, after all, very much about keeping it local. It’s the only farmers market within a 35-mile radius, and its mission statement affirms a commitment to “provide quality, locally grown produce to the community and provide an alternative income for our farmers.”

The shakers and movers behind the market have never lost sight of that commitment to bolstering local entrepreneurship.

One such entrepreneur is John Fipps, the owner of Higher Ground Organic Gardens in the Lebanon community of Columbus County. Fipps grows a variety of 20 or so organic vegetables and works the Farmers Market with his wife, Barbara, and daughter Andrea. His kids are the sixth generation to live on the family farm. After a stint in the military, Fipps came home to continue the tradition, and, as he himself acknowledges, he takes his growing serious: “I’m compulsive about it. If they had ‘Gardeners Anonymous,’ I’d have to go confess.”

Another local entrepreneur is Rossie Ward of Ward’s Nuts and Honey (“Have nuts. Will shell.”) in Chadbourn. The Wards used to grow tobacco. “We did everything the old-fashioned way,” he says. They’d also always grown pecans, but only began to pursue the nut business in earnest when farming tobacco was no longer a viable source of income. Ward and his brother now own two crackers, a sheller and a cleaner.

“Each year,” says Ward, “we’ll purchase a little more equipment.” Ward’s Nuts and Honey sells honey and cinnamon roasted pecans and perhaps soon chocolate-covered as well.

Ward says about a third of his sales are at the Farmers Market. He also grows blackberries and pomegranates.

“I think the market’s a good thing,” he says.

Attracting the tourists

The number of local patrons and farmer/vendors who attend the market each Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday continues to grow. Meanwhile, the market is turning the outside world on to the wonderful produce of coastal North Carolina. It’s proximity to Wilmington and the beaches of

both North and South Carolina makes it a popular stop for summer tourists – and with a new highway coming through, those numbers will continue to grow.

Just to name a few of the featured products available from April to mid-June: asparagus, blackberries, blueberries, cabbage, greenhouse tomatoes, okra, kale, lettuce, mustard greens, oriental vegetables, spinach, strawberries and bedding plants.

Summer will then bring, among others: basil, butter beans, cantaloupe, cucumbers, eggplant, garlic, peppers, potatoes, squash, sweet corn, swiss chard, tomatoes and watermelons.

And in the fall you can expect broccoli, cauliflower, collards, pumpkins, sweet potatoes, dried flowers and more.

Value-added products available throughout the market season include jams, jellies, pickles and honey and beeswax products.

Community service

“The market really has grown a lot over the years,” says Godwin. “This is the tenth season – ten seasons these farmers have been producing and growing. It started out with just four or five vendors, maybe six, and now the market has space for 20.”

Over the past few years, the market has received advertising and marketing support from various groups interested in promoting agribusiness and alternative crops. In addition, a website (www.columbuscountyfarmersmarket.com) helps promote the market.

The market also participates in two programs that are funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Food & Nutrition Service and administered by the NC Department of Health and Human Services in cooperation with the NC Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. These programs encourage the purchase of locally grown vegetables and fruit to improve nutrition while bolstering the local agricultural economy.

The first is the North Carolina Women, Infants and Children (WIC) Farmers Market Nutrition Program. It provides vouchers valued at \$3 to individuals who are enrolled in WIC’s Special Supplemental Nutrition Program. To participate in the program, vendors must receive certification by attending a training seminar. According to



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WE’RE GOING TO JUST CONTINUE GROWING.”



Godwin, last year the WIC program brought in \$3,270 in vouchers.

The second program is the North Carolina Seniors Farmers Market Nutrition Program, which also provides vouchers valued at \$3, these to seniors 60 years of age and older who participate in the Columbus County Department of Aging Nutrition Program.

Both of these programs meet multiple objectives – helping keep more of the food dollar in Columbus County, helping sustain local farms and providing better nutrition throughout the community.

Pursuant to these same objectives, Whiteville Primary School is one of 25 North Carolina schools participating in a five-year pilot project called the Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program. Funded by the USDA, this program provides the funding for participating schools to offer their students more fruit and vegetables than are otherwise provided in the National School Lunch and Breakfast programs. In coordination with the program, more than 200 Whiteville Primary youngsters have visited the Farmers Market and other local farm operations in order to learn more about the foods that help them stay healthy.



‘Good people, good place’

The next objective for the Columbus County Farmers Market is the building of a 1,200-square-foot shared-use kitchen in which value-added products can be prepared. The facility will include honey-extracting equipment, a space for cooking demos, office and storage space and more.

Dewey Hill represents Columbus and Brunswick counties in the North Carolina House of Representatives and is chairman of the Agriculture Committee. He’s committed to the continued success of the market.

“This market is so important to Columbus County,” he says. “I put a high priority on it. It’s going to be a real showplace; we’re going to just continue growing.

“We all worked hard to make this happen. But it’s

(top) Rep. Dewey Hill says the market is “so important to Columbus County.” Photos in this story courtesy of Steve Mann, Black Box Photography.

(bottom) Business is brisk on a Saturday morning.



dedicated farmers and dedicated local public officials that really made it happen.”

In accepting thanks during this year’s Farmers Market Opening Day Ceremonies for the role the Tobacco Trust Fund Commission has played in the success of the market, TTFC executive director William Upchurch said: “This just shows what can be done when you provide money to good people in a good place.”

The Columbus County Community Farmers Market represents the realization of a collective dream of local farmers to create an environment where they might not only offer their neighbors fresh, locally grown farm products, but where folks can gather and catch up.

As a comfortably steady stream of folks mill through the market on a moderate May morning – giving a gentle squeeze to a few freshly de-vined tomatoes, sampling a strawberry and breathing in the collective bouquet – John Fipps surveys the scene and observes of his fellow growers: “Everybody in here is kindred to each other. It’s fantastic. Everybody helps each other out.”

Fipps’ words constitute a pretty fine definition of community. Keeping that “Community” in the Columbus County Community Farmers Market has been a formula for success.

