

## Promoting Produce with Effective Displays

Whether you're selling produce from your own farm's market or from a stand at a farmers' market, creating an effective display can mean the difference between success and failure.

By Sally Colby



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A vignette featuring salsa made with the farm's own onions and tomatoes invites customers to taste the product, and signage suggests uses for the product.

*Photos by Sally Colby.*

Theresa Nartea, assistant professor and extension specialist for marketing and agribusiness with Virginia State University Cooperative Extension, suggested that the first step in creating an effective display is for the farmer to take a look at how the display appears to customers.

"One of the most important things a farmer can do to improve marketing is self-analyze," said Nartea. "Farmers are usually busy in production or packing and putting everything into the truck." She suggested that farmers can lay out photos of the market setup from previous years and look at them from every angle to determine where improvements can be made. "Ask people at the market manager if this is somewhere they'd :

Farmers who don't have photos to work with can set up their stand to resemble the way it will appear at the market, and then take pictures from various directions, especially from the initial approach and leading into the market area. "Put all of the pictures on a poster board or on a wall. Preview the customer and analyze each step of the way as the market is approached. It's important to capture the customer's attention at the very beginning because those customers will be loyal throughout the season. Once you have them, it's hard to lose them except through poor customer service. Customers are fickle, and they can always go to the next stand if someone else has the same products," Nartea explained.

She said that farmers should consider themselves part of the display and establish uniformity among staff through clothing that distinguishes them from customers. Polo shirts or hats with the farm logo are an effective way to make staff visible. Farms that aren't ready for custom logo can purchase inexpensive aprons from a craft store to create a uniform appearance. "Having a uniform color shows an air of professionalism and helps build customer trust," said Nartea.

Although customers appreciate the fact that people who sell produce work in soil, farmers should keep their hands and fingernails clean, especially when they're handling produce and working with the display. If possible, avoid wearing adhesive bandages over small wounds; use liquid bandages instead. "Customers look at the hands that grow the food," said Nartea. "They think of purity, but they don't always realize it's from a farm."

Outdoor signs leading to a farm market should be neat, easy to read and equipped with basic information about what's for sale. Signage at farmers' markets is critical in attracting customers who have numerous shopping options within a relatively small area.

An easel and chalkboard at the front of the stand can be used to list products for sale. Nartea said, "Some of the high-end specialty grocery stores use a special ink, which doesn't rub off and looks more professional. A market can use the same ink [available at craft stores] to get that look."

Signage should have easy-to-read lettering and words that are spelled properly. "As people pass by, the chalkboard should be visible from about 3 feet," said Nartea. "Step back and make sure you can read the lettering on your own boards. The longer you can keep someone at a display, the more they will be inclined to spend money. That's why it's so important to spend time designing the display."

The most ideal shape for a farmers' market is a U shape that allows customers to flow naturally from one point to the next. Whenever possible, produce displays should appeal to each of the senses. Switch up the display to create visual appeal through multiple dimensions, rather than displaying everything vertically with items laid out from left to right. "Think about shapes, what looks interesting, and what will attract people," said Nartea. "Stacked produce boxes arranged near the front of the display attract customers, but they shouldn't interfere with the flow of traffic through the shopping area. Think about whether customers can move around without being awkward."



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Customers are more likely to make purchases when they can see how various fruits or vegetables can be used. This vignette is centered around blueberries and includes recipes, storage suggestions, muffin mix and blueberry-themed pottery.



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Market personnel should be available at all times, working with the customers and willing to answer questions. Customers make selections. Photos by Sally Colby.

Produce displays will have more visual appeal when color is used effectively. Nartea said that placing yellow flowers toward the front of a display is a subliminal message that causes customers to pause and pay attention. "When customers first start coming to a stand in spring, all they see is green," she said. "Farmers should think about a color punch that attracts people. Punctuate a green display with yellow, red or orange flowers."

Tables should always be covered, even if it's with a simple plastic tablecloth. "Pay attention to clientele and the colors they're wearing," said Nartea. "People are drawn to the colors they wear. A nice cloth tablecloth is ideal and denotes quality. If you can't afford a tablecloth, use a long sheet as a tablecloth." In addition to providing a backdrop for produce, the tablecloth serves to hide storage space under the table, and should be secured so it doesn't catch or blow in the wind.

Nartea suggested that farmers avoid large, busy patterns that compete with the produce. Gingham is an ideal fabric because it denotes quality without being overpowering. If possible, farmers should have a variety of table covers so they can switch them out from season to season, depending on the produce featured. Table covers should be properly aired out and dry before storage so they don't become moldy. Table covers can be kept wrinkle-free if they're rolled onto a discarded cardboard fabric bolt.

Baskets denote farming and are an important part of any produce display. Nartea said that the newer plastic baskets won't damage fragile produce, but traditional wood, wicker or rattan containers should be lined to prevent damage. However, baskets made from natural materials require more care. "Farmers sometimes don't dry baskets, and the basket becomes moldy," said Nartea. "If you don't have time to dry natural material baskets, choose plastic. Pay attention to color of baskets and what's going in each one. There should be a contrast between the produce and the basket - don't put eggplant in a dark basket."

Market staff should be working with the display and working to engage customers, rather than simply sitting or standing around. Phone calls should be taken outside the stand area. Nartea said that when the customer sees that the farmer cares about the display, that customer is more likely to make a purchase. Most of all, make it easy and fun for people to shop. "Most people who visit farm stores or farmers' markets intend to purchase. It's a matter of what draws their attention and makes them stop long enough to decide to purchase."

Every customer at a farmstand or farmers' market should receive exceptional service. A good first step is to place bags at both ends of the display so customers can find them easily. According to Nartea, research shows that the majority of shoppers are women, and women prefer not to reach over to reach items. Make sure items are at hip height, and use doorstops to angle baskets on tables, or 5-gallon buckets on the ground for products. Smaller buckets can be used on tabletops to create layers.



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Colorful plastic baskets are easy to keep clean and show off summer produce in a simple yet interesting manner.

Keep the display neat, and be careful not to overcrowd items, especially fragile produce. Maintain order, and include some open space within the display so it doesn't appear cluttered. "With valuable products there's a tendency to layer products one on top of another without any space," said Nartea. She suggested allowing one hand's worth of space between groups of different products such as jars.

For the display itself, begin by creating a sense of fullness. Produce should be abundant and in display containers. Nartea suggested having baskets in several sizes so that when the supply dwindles, remaining produce can be placed in a medium basket and then into a smaller basket. "I want to see that they're getting the last pickings," she said. "If the produce looks picked through, the customer is gone."

Nartea said the farmers' market or farmstand is an educational tool that most farmers don't take advantage of. "They need to do more than focus on writing 'cucumbers for \$1,'" she said, noting that superfoods are the most rapidly growing food trends. "Give them information about the cultivar, serving size and vitamins. Consumers are hearing about this aspect of food, so it's worth promoting healthy eating in your display. Focus on signage that promotes the nutritional value of products. List the serving sizes so people buy more."

If your stand features interesting or unusual produce, create interesting vignettes to make that produce stand out and show off its best features. Farmers should plan vignettes in advance so setup doesn't become time-consuming. When possible, make small changes from week to week to keep the display interesting. This gives the customer an opportunity to discover a new product as they're looking for what they need.



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Signage for on-farm markets is critical in drawing attention to the market. It would be easier for a customer to keep driving than to stop at a market that has poorly written signage, sloppy displays and an overall lack of appeal.

Most farmers who sell produce at farmers' markets use tents. Sometimes a farmer will pay more for a tent that's unique in color or design, but Nartea said that white is the best color for a tent. "It's reflective, and the colors of the produce will bounce off white," she said. "Colors that absorb light will cast a shadow on the produce, which makes it look dark and unattractive. A farm might think that a red or blue tent will stand out and draw more customers, but the produce display may have a dark cast." A unique flag or banner outside the tent will draw attention without interfering with produce color, and won't be in the way of customers coming in.

"Farmers come up with wonderful ideas," said Nartea. "They just need to have their minds focused on display and it will come naturally."

you spend conceiving the display is another dollar earned. It's worth taking the time."

*The author is a frequent contributor and freelance writer who farms and raises Great Pyrenees in south-central Pennsylvania. Comment Visit [www.farmingforumsite.com](http://www.farmingforumsite.com) and join in the discussions.*