



Observations on the 2020 Pandemic's Impact on Produce Farms in Vermont

Compiled from grower newsletter reports, phone calls and emails

Vern Grubinger – December 31, 2020

Summary: most growers adapted to the new normal, and combined with a dry but decent growing season, had a good year in terms of yields and sales. Many growers with direct sales had dramatic increases, especially early on in the pandemic. Some PYO operations did not open; others did and experienced strong demand. Growers with heavy reliance on restaurants or out of state markets had to scramble, but other markets generally picked up the slack

Almost all growers experienced added stress due to changes in markets, evolving pandemic rules, school closings and lack of childcare, and concerns about safety for themselves, family, workers, customers. Planning for the future is difficult as the lasting impacts of the pandemic are unclear.

By the latter part of the growing season, many growers felt like they worked extremely hard, with increased expenses, to quickly adjust to COVID, but were left unable to qualify for assistance either due to lack of time, lack of up to date recordkeeping, or sheer lack of clarity as to whether they should apply. All the attention in terms of funding, surveys, and various agency programs quickly used up grower bandwidth during their busiest time of year. Filling out forms and compiling records was just not possible for many growers, let alone wrapping their heads around what was required for different assistance programs. By the time the USDA's CFAP-2 program was offered in November it took some encouragement to get widespread participation, despite the fact that it clearly was of financial benefit for most diversified vegetable and fruit farms to participate.

Grower comments on pandemic effects (from most recent to earlier in the season).

Despite all the weirdness it's been a good year. We were able to pivot pretty seamlessly since we had multiple markets. We lost all our restaurant sales overnight, put all that effort and product into our CSA and tripled it. Had to adjust our labor but got it down to 8-10 hours a week for 350 shares. We could probably be more efficient. A month delay in getting H2A workers had us nervous, we would have had to totally change our labor plan but good they came through. Direct to store sales boomed for a very short period and then leveled back to normal. I thought some buyers would buy more, but it's just been steady since the upswing in March and April.

As we reflect on this past year we are reminded that "it isn't over till it's over." The changes in marketing for us have been drastic and there could be even more as this year closes. We will make decisions over the next few weeks about going to home deliveries or staying in markets with lots of financial and family/workers input.

Much time will be spent this winter trying to envision what 2021 will look like for the farm. The ornamentals brokers and greenhouse staff have pretty much agreed not to jump to conclusions based on this season's rapid sell out. People were responding to quarantine, and that could change with a vaccine. The same with retail and wholesale vegetable sales. We don't believe the Fed is going to pump money into local ag and food shelves like it did this past summer, those income spikes likely will not be sustainable. So our plan is to proceed this coming season in planting pretty much as we would in a "normal year" and refrain from any capital improvements or expansion in response to this year's spike in gross sales. Perhaps it is too conservative, but it feels right to the family and staff.

The two Thanksgiving markets we usually do--indoor events--were cancelled due to the pandemic but sales of value-added goods have switched to online ordering and curbside pickups. We making about the same sales without the expense and effort of physically traveling and setting up a booth. It's another way the pandemic has been the mother of invention.

After 34 years of farmers' markets being our primary outlet, we are reducing them and going full speed this winter on our on-line business with pre-order pickups in 3 locations and home delivery, which we have been refining since March.

The pandemic affected our [wholesale] southern markets considerably this year, making them more volatile and less reliable. So I think we'll reconsider our crop mix for next season, growing less lettuce and more root crops. Our new packing line will make that strategy more attractive, too. And the new line will help us work toward our goal of expanding into more grocery chains in Vermont and New England and shipping less produce out of the region.

Our farm dropped our one winter market and two summer markets back in March and increased our summer CSA from about 100 members to nearly 250. It took a little adjusting to our crop plan and weekly farm routines, but we've managed to keep our CSA free-choice and got very positive feedback from our customers this summer. It's really sweet to see how much it means to people to be connected to their vegetable farm. About two-thirds of our members pick up from a new display cooler in our barn, and we pack and deliver bags for the remaining folks using a google form generated spreadsheet that members use to choose what they'd like. We've really enjoyed the efficiency gains from consolidating our marketing and are conscious to try to make the experience as valuable as possible for our members to maintain a high retention rate.

Happy to have nearly pulled through such an uncertain year. CSA and wholesale sales have been strong; irrigation has been key. Covid logistics have been scary, but health has been good.

Farmers markets have been steady with the craziness subsiding but our home deliveries are ramping up, so lots to consider this winter about where we will put our efforts.

(Wholesale) sales have been strong this fall for just about everything. Lettuce sales have picked back up and our Florida market is back on track. So all in all, the outlook is good.

We didn't do our major farmers' market this, in some ways it was a relief but it was a big economic hit. Got invited to a pre-order market that formed called Chester Helping Hands, I post my crops, quantity and prices on their web site, then people have 4 days to order, I take it up. In two and half hours and I am done, it is a no contact market, leave money on windshield, I put box in a trunk and off they go, but some days are as good as the big farmer's market given the lower labor costs. That said I'm hoping to go back to the regular farmers' market next year. Wholesale stores have been about the same as last year. Early season we had to cut back ornamentals because we did not know what was going to happen with garden stores.

All in all, as good a season as we could expect and actually a bit better- We are thankful that people seem to want local produce more than ever. And eggs? what is with the demand for eggs?

Still undecided about the best path for winter marketing but keeping markets and home delivery options open. Markets and online sales remain strong.

Sales remain strong, but they have been influenced by the pandemic. Not planning on this year being the norm.

It has been the busiest season sales-wise. Just wish we weren't in a major drought as we normally would have so much to sell. Lots of new customers coming.

One positive effect of Covid-19 is that a fair number of our local workers who would be returning to college now will be staying on to work through the fall.

Markets continue to be steady as well as our on-line system and home deliveries, with more partner businesses added each week to the mix. Baked goods, soaps, etc. as we plan for uncharted waters this winter. The only thing assured is the home deliveries. Overall, sales are beyond expectations, with no history to know how long it will last or how this will end up, but we will ride it.

Our PYO blueberry farm has been quite busy this year, even on the weekdays. This has been a relief since we were unable to have our typical Music Night events and has helped us stay on top of the picking. Curbside pick-ups for orders of 6 quarts of picked blueberries have been popular. Customers have been doing a great job following our Covid guidelines and seem happy to enjoy a socially distanced outdoor family activity. It does look like our season will be on the shorter side, likely due to the hot July temps which have been ripening the berries fairly quickly. Overall it's been a great few weeks for our season.

For the first time not opening for u-pick because of COVID-19. We will pick and sell or donate to food shelves.

U Pick customers are happy, even with Covid 19 restrictions!

It has been an amazing year for (retail) business.

The wash station tent we have set up in front of the farm store might be the best thing we have done this PYO season. It signals we are serious about safety and sets a tone of respect for the farm and for others. Even people just coming in to buy a pint of blueberries wash their hands before they approach the shop window. Eating berries while picking has ceased and how we love that. Children are not running around unsupervised. Expressions of gratitude for making picking available have increased greatly. People are craving getting outside, being in a safe place, and gathering healthy food. And the hot, dry weather and continual irrigation has contributed to us having a wonderful blueberry crop, with conditions like California. Insect pressure is low. Weeds have slowed down. We have a bountiful crop, plenty of pickers, and happy customers. Somebody pinch me!

The big change is pandemic protocols and effect on the retail public and our sales force. Farmstand sales are very strong, as predicted. But there is a segment of the public that has tired of the novelty of the distancing and masking-up, and we have experienced some nastiness. I talked to our (all female) farmstand crew in regards to taking unreasonable, shall we say, crap from customers. I have given the managers carte blanche to tell troublemakers to leave and not come back. I trust their judgement, and I have seen a few tears so we feel it is time to be firm. We are going to talk to our local police guy and ask him to develop protocols for handling unruly customers.

The crew for the farm stand and picking are getting Covid19 training before starting this week. We are having multiple shifts so the crew will be able to stagger lunches and breaks. We decided to have only two berries that will be PYO and the others will be pre-picked or commercial only because it will be too hard to keep social distancing in those other fields.

Pick your own is restricted this year. Customers must wear face masks. A 10-pound minimum per couple in car. Also no large groups. We may be annoying some folks, but others are happy with the control. Our employees feel safer and we are still living.

Our experience running PYO under the Agency of Ag Covid-prevention guidelines has been seamless. We are enormously grateful first of all to our unflappable crew and then to all the customers who made (and kept) PYO appointments to limit crowding, wore masks, bought new containers, washed hands, and refrained from eating berries in the field. Even little kids seemed to just accept the “New Rules” as a minor trade-off for getting yummy organic berries to take home. Most people expressed relief that our structure and organization allowed them to relax and enjoy a cherished outdoor activity that felt almost “normal.” We did raise our price to partially cover the increased labor and supplies but got no complaints.

Greenhouse retail sales were strong, due in large part to quarantine measures both self and government imposed. I'll bet the cost of doing business in the pandemic will counter any gains made in gross sales. Concerned about availability of packaging once we get into the produce portion of our season. Between the pandemic and FSMA, the cardboard industry is going to get a real boost.

At this point, we are not likely to open as a PYO this year. To meet the letter of the plan will incur additional unanticipated costs (containers, shift to cashless, wifi, washing stations, signage) and need for more workers to supervise guests in field and around check in and out. Our traditional family-centered farm will need to assume a more uncomfortable relationship to guests re: masks, children, eating and social distancing in field, etc. Rather we will seek some collaboration(s) with organizations which are willing to harvest and sell and distribute in the region. We can do this for a year,

It seems that we transferred all of the time we usually spend hauling kids around between sports, school, day care, and socializing into hauling little packages of greens, meat, eggs and other foods to friends and friends of friends. Without much effort, we quickly built up a list of 140 people, with about 50 ordering regularly, for a weekly delivery. It felt like the right way to serve our community and motivated us to stay on top of our salad greens more than usual, while it also provided a little early season income. We decided to halt the deliveries after last week as it seems safer for people to shop in their usual places and also to allow us to focus more on our summer crops.

People seem very inclined to buy local. Both wholesale and retail sales are way ahead of last year. I thought we might have a lot of US workers applying for work, but it's not the case. Put in a new hand washing sink after research revealed that soap and water is better than hand sanitizer. Covid 19 protocols by the dozen.