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Food To Bank On helps local farmers grow their business



Hello and happy late summer from the Food & Farming corner of Sustainable Connections (affectionately dubbed the "Back 40")!

I'm especially happy this year for the season of bounty, after our long, cold

and hungry spring. Hungry for the fresh, local bounty of Whatcom fields, that is. Now, with Farmers Market booths bursting with color, farmstands beckoning from so many roadsides, and restaurants, cafes, and grocery store shelves laden with local fare, I'm gleefully enjoying my months-long sugar high. By the time you read this, Eat Local Week will be right around the corner (September 7-14), with a smorgasbord of delicious offerings featuring local food and agriculture.

I approach this season of feasting as an eater, first and foremost, but also as an advocate for sustainable, local, food and farming-based business, and as a recovering farmer. Now that I spend my days working with a business organization, I find it ironic that when I was a farmer, business was the furthest thing from my mind. My motivation was the joy of nurturing living things into nourishing food for my community.

And that's the passion I find in the eyes of the farmers I meet here. It's not necessarily the passion for management, accounting, taxes, marketing, licensing, and the 101 other requirements for being a successful entrepreneur, not to mention mechanics, etymology, weather science, hydrology, carpentry, leaping regulatory hurdles, and the 101 other requirements specific to being a successful farmer.

Supporting farmers in a few of those 101 "other" keys to successful, sustainable business is one focus of Sustainable Connections' Food & Farming Program, particularly of the Food To Bank On farm incubation project. A good example is the informal business-planning series that FTBO's current crop of nine beginning farmers participated in early this year. Through six workshops, hosted at each others' homes and led by peers, participants worked together to think through their business plans, financial projections, crop schedules, marketing schemes, record keeping, and other topics critical to their success in business.

It's not exactly a business degree, but it's a solid introduction to a realm that, for these folks, has typically played second fiddle to their focus on producing great

business planning series this year has been a huge help ... the skills I learned are already being put to good use in applying for financing to expand my farm!"

Business-to-business relationships are a cornerstone of all Sustainable Connections' work, and is of particular value in the Food & Farming Program, where food producers and food buyers work so intimately with each other. A relationship based on a handshake at a trade meeting, a sample of cheese offered across a trade table by a third-generation dairy farmer, or a visit to your fields by a vanload of buyers on a Chef Farm Tour — now that's a strong business relationship. Trade meetings consistently draw 60 to 80 participants, significant for a community this size.

Marketing is another strength that the program brings to this "community of businesses." In the Food & Farming Program, that marketing support is a relief to many of our members, who are spread plenty thin in the fields and generally don't have a graphic designer on retainer. A listing in the Whatcom Farm Map & Guide is the only advertising many local farms do, and it's a powerful medium with 30,000 copies in nearly 200 distribution points this year. The powerful "Buy FRESH" brand, recognized by 69 percent of Bellingham residents, is also used by many of them, on twist ties, stickers, banners, and on their own materials.

So many Whatcom County farmers go the extra mile to ensure that their land remains productive for future generations, that our water remains plentiful and clean, that our community is well fed and respectfully treated, that our food is produced in a durable and conscientious way. Likewise, our food buying businesses, the restaurants, grocers, caterers, and local processors who participate in the Food & Farming Program are working hard to support local agriculture, minimize their waste, use green power, and take many other steps toward good stewardship. This year's Farm Map and the new Guide to Eating Local use icons to indicate leaders in sustainable practices.

Of course, the business of food and farming is not relevant only to those who make their living from it. It's intimately relevant to every eater, every business with employees who eat, every company picnic or event with food, every lunch break and coffee meeting. Every individual has a three-times-a-day opportunity to affect the local food system, and every business has an even greater ability to use their influence for the benefit of local food and agriculture. So consider using Eat Local Week as a chance to bring local food to your business, whether food is your primary focus or not. For ideas, visit www.SustainableConnections.org or give us a ring at (360) 647-7093.

Best wishes to you for a season of eating well!

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