

# Marketing Local Fresh Produce from a University Research Station

## RFR-A1540

Brandon Carpenter, ag specialist  
Nick Howell, farm superintendent  
Mark Honeyman, farms coordinator

### Introduction

The ISU Horticulture Station serves a wide range of research projects including vegetable and fruit crops. Produce is generated from a variety of activities including field research projects, a student-run plot, plantings for teaching, and bulk areas. Some of the produce is not useable once research and teaching functions are complete. However, a considerable amount of produce is generated in marketable condition. In the past, apple was the primary crop marketed. Much of the other produce generated before 2006 was not sold and often disposed of onsite. Over the last 10 years, the Station has made a focused effort to market more of its produce locally. The marketing of produce gives students an opportunity to gain experience developing markets and dealing with customers, as well as supplement the station's budget. Funds generated through the sale of produce help offset station costs and keep user fees lower for researchers.

### Results and Discussion

The growth of our sales of fresh local produce has been steady, but slow. Developing markets for many of the vegetable products is difficult because many of these products are harvested all at once and have limited post-harvest longevity. Much of the produce that our markets are unable to absorb is donated to local food banks and food pantries. The largest is Food at First, Ames, Iowa.

*Volume.* In 2008, we marketed approximately \$13,000 worth of produce. About one third of this amount was internally marketed to ISU Dining. The major crop was apples.

Seven years later in 2015, we marketed approximately \$30,000 of produce. About 40 percent of this was to ISU Dining. Apples, which were a large crop in 2015, still were a major portion of sales, but also included were about 30 additional types of vegetables and fruit (Figure 1).

*Customers.* The Horticulture Station is concerned about actively competing with local growers selling local produce, thus farmer's markets have been avoided. We also ask that our non-government customers not buy from us if a local grower is selling the same product.

ISU Dining, the entity that handles the major dining venues within ISU—residence hall cafeterias, the Memorial Union, campus coffee shops, etc.—is our primary customer.

We also rely on local growers who purchase produce from us wholesale to broker through their marketing operations. Recently, we have developed markets with Iowa prisons and mental hospitals that have a distribution warehouse in central Iowa. Also, local schools and local cooperative grocery stores have become significant customers. Since 2014 we have been using a student-developed website to market directly to ISU students and staff. Other customers include service clubs, nursing homes, student sororities and fraternities, and others.

### Lessons Learned

- Marketing local fresh produce is more difficult and time-consuming than expected.
- Relationships are key to significant marketing of local produce.
- Quality and safety also is key. We have added GAP compliance, vegetable washer, sanitation guidelines, and better containers to our operation.
- Learning opportunities for staff, faculty, and students are significant (Figure 2).
- Institutional customers are our best markets but meeting size and quality specifications can be challenging.
- Customers are everywhere and nearby.
- Technology can be helpful in direct marketing produce.

- There still is room to grow.

### Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support and leadership of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture.



**Figure 1.** Brussels sprout stalks harvested at the end of 2015 growing season. These were one of the most popular products for the online sales.



**Figure 2.** Students washing and sorting apples into one time use boxes. Apples are washed as they are sold to extend storage life and quality.