



SCIG: SUMMARY OF FARMER INTERVIEWS

How long have you been producing food here?

- Farming for less than 10 years (new/beginning farmers): nine participants total
- Children of multi-generational farming families coming back to the farm: two total
- Farming for more than 10 years: five total

How long have to you been selling food in direct markets (e.g., farmers markets, through a CSA or farm store...)?

- 2 years: 2 participants total
- 4-6 years: 3 total
- 11-12 years: 5 total
- more than 15 years: 3 total

How would you describe the production practices that you use on your farm?

Some farmers claimed more than one production practice. The distribution of practices included:

- 11 grew organically (eight non-certified and three certified)
- six claimed GMO-free
- one used a mix of organic and conventional methods
- one followed the Certified Naturally Grown™ program
- one reported using low spray, three biodynamic methods
- one followed permaculture methods

Do you have any specific certifications related to your production practices? If so, what certifications do you have?

- 3 certified organic
- 1 Certified Naturally Grown

How often do customers ask you about your production practices, if at all?

Farmers responses ranged from 5% to 50% of the time for those that answered the question with a percentage. The predominant response was “not very often.”

Farmers attributed a couple of reasons to explain why customers don't ask. They are repeat customers, farmer signage answers their question(s), they are not concerned about farmers' growing methods, or they make assumptions about the food and growing practices of farmers selling at markets. On the first reason, farmers noted they have a lot of repeat customers. Those customers know their practices and do not need to ask. On the latter reason, several farmers suspected that when you are selling at the farmers market, shoppers make assumptions about

the production qualities of the food being grown, about the production practices of small scale farming.

What types of questions do they ask? / What kinds of information are they interested in?

For farms growing produce: all noted they received organic production-related questions. Is it organic? Organic certified? Grown organically? Do you use organic seed (is the seed GMO-free)? Do you (use) spray? One farmer growing produce organically noted that “spray” seems to have become a shorthand for distinguishing organic from nonorganic (even though organic farmers can use approved sprays).

For farms using biodynamic methods: What is biodynamic/what does biodynamic mean?

For animal agriculture: Customer are interested in what they are being fed. Are they getting organic feed? Is it non-GMO feed? And they are interested in the life/treatment of the animals. Do they have access to the outdoors? Are they "free range"? How are the animals treated?

Beyond questions about growing methods, farmers noted that a sometimes more frequent question is, “did you grow what you’re selling?”

How often do customers tell you about their preferences for how they would like their food to be produced? What have they expressed?

Most farmers said customers do not explicitly express their preferences. Customers express their preferences through the questions they ask and nonverbally through their decision to purchase or not to purchase their products.

Do you think that your responses influence their decision of whether to purchase your products? How do you know [e.g., direct feedback from individuals, their purchasing actions, etc]?

- One farmer noted that many of the people that come to their farmers market are looking for food produced in particular ("sustainable") ways.
- Another farmer said he thinks that if he were to answer customer questions with “no, we are not organic” or “we use GMO seeds” that they would go somewhere else. They are asking those questions because specific qualities are important to them.
- Another farmer, who uses low spray, noted that when she explains “the way, how, and why” behind their production practices and decisions some customers decide to purchase their produce; others, when you tell them it is not organic certified, walk away.
- Another using mixed methods said that some customers will walk away because they are looking for strictly organic. Some do not - they are comfortable with his mix and his explanation about why he chooses to use some conventional methods. They appreciate his honesty and his effort to use products with the lowest toxicity levels and buy from him.
- Another, who is Certified Naturally Grown, noted that their “elevator speech” usually satisfies customers (“we are certified naturally grown, which is based on the national organic standards. We don't do anything that wouldn't be allowed in that program.)

- Another farmer stated, “Well they joined our CSA because we were the only organic certified CSA around and that was a concern and they were thankful for it....they wanted organic food so that's why they came to us.”
- Another farmer, commenting on the preferences of customers shopping at the farmers markets in the region stated, “...most of the people that go to the tailgate markets, for the most part, regular customers, go because they want to eat local food and they want it to be organic.”

Over the years that you’ve been producing food and selling to customers, have the kinds of production-related questions that are being asked of you changed? If so, how have they changed?

Yes: There are more questions about GMOs - what are they, do they use GMOs in feed, do they use GMO seeds?

No or “not really”: The questions have not changed, the frequency of particular questions have increased. People are primarily interested in the organic question. Are farmers spraying? What do they spray? Some farmers noted the difference between rural and urban market customers. There is not as much concern in rural markets about production practices as in urban markets.

To what extent, if at all, have your interactions with customers impacted the way that you produce and/or grow food? Can you cite specific examples?

Farmers connected decisions to use specific growing methods to a variety of reasons.

- Many cited personal beliefs, which they tied to the way they were raised, the desire to be a good land steward, address the negative impacts of the global food system.
- Organic farmers: market conditions tied to opportunities in the market for organic food and to demand expressed directly by market customers.
- Farmers using conventional practices: the practicalities imposed by the climate and conditions of the region and the need to use some conventional methods to deal with high disease pressure and have a marketable crop to sell.

What is the most effective way for a customer to let you know how they want their food grown?

Face-to-face: ask farmers how it is grown, then make the decision to purchase it or not. Face to face allows there to be conversation and give and take around the topic.

Face-to-face but with an open mind: some farmers (those using conventional methods) indicate they feel they are being attacked by some customers, who already “know” what is and is not acceptable and if they do not fall into the acceptable category the customer can be confrontational. Related to this, some farmers noted that many shoppers do not know very much about production practices, do not know the kinds of questions to ask, or have false information about particular practices.

Face to face but not when markets are busy: Several farmers note that when the market is busy, they do not have the time to engage in conversations about their practices.

What kinds of information, if any, do you share with the public about your production practices?

Production practices through:

- Signage:
 - No spray sign
 - Stating they grow organically but are not certified
 - Stating “local and sustainably produced”
 - Certified organic language and logo
- A developed “elevator speech”
- With photos of their farm and practices
- Verbal detail particularly for farmers using conventional practices - the “what, how, and why” behind their practices
- Information customers can take with them (pamphlets, rack cards, business cards with websites, the findings of studies about the safety or benefits of their methods)

(How) do you talk with the public about the added costs of sustainable/small scale production?

All of the farmers stated that conversations about added costs are infrequent.

Addressing questions about higher costs or customers that complain about higher prices, farmers have variably talked about:

- The added costs of small scale production particularly with respect to inputs and labor
- The need in organic production to sometimes use products more often for pests or disease because they do not stay on the plant
- Crop losses experienced by organic farmers compared to conventional farmers (a 25% to 50% loss is not unusual)
- Spending more on high quality food and less on medical bills

How do you communicate this information to the public?

- Face to face at markets, farm tours, etc
- Market signage - stall banners, product signage with price, product, and practice, sandwich boards
- Websites and blogs
- Facebook
- Instagram
- ASAP Local Food Guide
- Educational materials market shoppers can take
- Community talks/workshops

Do you find it to be challenging to communicate with the public about your production practices? Why or why not?

Challenges noted included:

- Having conversations in busy market environments
- Having conversations with customers that have set expectations or false understandings about practices
- Getting customers to ask farmers about their practices (and not assume how farmers at markets are growing food)

- Educating their farm labor on the farm's practices so that they are able communicate to customers and answer their questions.
Talking to customers about the true costs of growing food sustainably on small scales

What have you found to be the most effective ways to educate people about your production practices?

- Clear market signage
- Farm website/newsletter
- Farmer market website
- Other publications/ASAP Local Food Guide
- Face to face
- Farm days/farm tours
- Social media/facebook/instagram
- Talks at educational venues

Least effective?

- Not having a sign/signage: Without a sign, customers might make incorrect assumptions about practices and may not feel comfortable asking farmers about their practices.
- Websites: Websites are stagnant. Farmers cannot dialogue with customers through a website the way they can through Facebook, for example.
- Not communicating your practices to customers: Farmers who are not open to customer questions or have not spent the time thinking about the best ways to communicate them
- Preaching to customers about your practices; being confrontational

How have these interactions affected *the way* you communicate about the practices you use?

Through customer interactions farmers learned the importance of:

- Always displaying a clear sign with practices.
- Remaining calm during difficult conversations because there are some people that feel very passionately about what practices should or should not be used. The farmer's job is to provide shoppers with the information and respect their choice to buy their product or not.
- Being friendly and approachable.
- Simplifying the message. Most customers don't want too much information - honing your message down to the basics (the elevator speech) and let customers drive how far they want to go into detail.
- Being non-confrontational. Not pushing your growing philosophies/ideas/beliefs on others.

What would be helpful to you to communicate to the public about your production practices?

Consumer Education:

- About non-organic methods and why some farmers use them.
- About organic practices. There are lots of false assumptions about organic production.

- About why small scale production can be more expensive.
- Provide definitions of what different designations mean in the Local Food Guide,
- To educate the public about producer only markets
- To dispel the notion that local food means environmentally friendly practices.
- Establish a separate educational booth at markets to field shopper questions and distribute information.
- Use the Local Food Guide to educate consumers about production practices.

Farmer Education: Educate farmers about the terminology they can and can't use. Help farmers understand those distinctions.

Food and farm experiences: Organize and promote farm tours. Visiting the farm helps the public understand the realities of farming, why farmers produce the way they do, and builds customer loyalty.

Promotion: Revitalize the 'why buy local' message and talk about how markets provide fresh high quality food and sustain farming families. That message has been co-opted by grocers.

Materials: Market signage

Farmers should educate: It's up to the farmer to communicate their practices.