

Extension learning community focuses on growing healthy food and healthy businesses

An increasing number of consumers want to eat locally grown food and are willing to pay extra for produce, meat and dairy products that are safe, fresh and flavorful. This trend creates business opportunities for small producers to sell their products to restaurants, at farmers' markets, and through community-supported agricultural enterprises.

Growing their own businesses while supporting other producers is the approach members of a Dallas County group are using to improve local food options. Known as "Growing Food and Profit," this team of 20 meets monthly from September to May to share ideas and expertise; sometimes they even trade equipment. Every June, they tour a member's farm or a local agricultural enterprise. The group is organized by Iowa State University (ISU) Extension in collaboration with the Iowa Network for Community Agriculture and the Dallas County Farm Service Agency. Other partners have included National Rural Catholic Life.



Members produce and sell everything from fruits and vegetables to herbs, honey, flowers, broiler chickens, eggs, milk, and meat. Cleve Pulley sells organic fruits and vegetables grown on his land near Redfield to area restaurants. He says, "There is no way to put a dollar value on what I have learned as a member of Growing Food and Profit. . . the sky is the limit for what I can do with my business," he says.

"All you have to do is ask and someone can answer your questions about production, distribution or marketing," says Ralph Lane of Prole, who sells vegetables, pies and soy candles at farmers' markets with his wife Karen. "Through this group we've learned ways to improve our products and how to build relationships with our customers. We're growing every year."

Research shows that safe and healthy locally grown food benefits families, communities, and the economy. According to ISU's Leopold Center, if Iowans ate the recommended five servings of fruits and vegetables every day and bought them all locally while in season (three months of the year), an extra \$300 million and more than 4,000 jobs would be added to the Iowa economy.

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- Cleve Pulley, Redfield

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