



Tips for Buying from Local Farmers & Producers

Having a buying relationship directly with farmers or producers can be more work, but also educational and rewarding. You'll learn more about local food—how it's grown or produced—and benefit from extra products when in abundance.

The school food procurement system doesn't naturally lend itself to buying directly from farmers. In developing a system that works for farmers and schools, both sides will have issues and concerns. Being open to dialogue and negotiation is the first step toward building lasting, viable partnerships.

Do a little research. See who is growing products in your area. Besides the internet, you can also connect with farmers at farmers' markets, roadside stands, U-pick farms, and even with neighbors who may plant more than they need.

Prepare a short list of products. Prepare a short list of products, volumes, and frequency of purchasing for the items you want. If you know how you will use them (cut up raw or cooked or both) note that as well. Don't forget meat, eggs, and dairy!

Set up business appointments. Contact the farmers in the early morning or evening, since many farmers are in their fields or marketing their crops during the day. If you leave a message, be sure to indicate when is a good time to call you back and if you have a direct phone extension.

Request free samples.

When you meet a farmer interested in working with you, ask if he or she can provide a free sample of the product so that you can see if it will meet your school's needs and requirements.

Visit farmers at their farms.

Observing local farm businesses in action gives you a better idea about food safety, availability, pricing, and challenges and will demonstrate to the growers your sincere interest in their product. Farm visits also give you the chance to speak directly to a farmer about what you want and need in the unique context of your farm to school relationship.

Talk to farmers as early as possible so they can plan accordingly.

Hold winter meetings when farmers are less busy, and plan what products you want to use with the farmers so they have some notice and can be prepared for what you want to buy. To develop a reputation as a reliable customer, commit to a realistic purchasing volume and develop a realistic delivery schedule that suits your and the farmer's needs.

Be aware of your school's insurance coverage requirements

Most farmers carry liability insurance. Ask them if they do before entering into contracts that may require it.

Ask farmers to develop a weekly availability sheet.

Having updated information about availability, the size of food items, quality descriptions, estimated quantity, and price per unit will make it easier for you to make good purchasing decisions.

Look for products that are difficult to obtain from long-distance shippers.

There are certain foods, particularly produce, that aren't on the distributors' trucks because they're unusual (such as ground cherries) or difficult to transport (like small plums). Ask your farmers if they have some such products to try out in your program.

Create a system for supply replacements with the farmer.

Sometimes the weather doesn't cooperate and planned produce is unavailable. Often farmers are able to offer a substitution. But it's good to have a back-up of frozen vegetables just in case.

Decide on micro-purchase or informal bid. For one-time purchases or trying out new farms or products, consider using a micro-purchase process. For repeat and consistent purchasing, you must use the "3 bids and a buy" informal bid solicitation process.

Establish a payment schedule plan. Farmers' costs are upfront, and they're accustomed to presenting an invoice and receiving payment upon delivery. School districts often have a payment cycle of 30–90+ days. Decide on your schedule from the start.

Discuss and negotiate the important details:

- Estimated volume of products the farmer can offer
- Delivery schedule including time of day, frequency, and location
- Packing requirements: standard box, grade, loose pack, bulk
- Seasonal availability of the products you want
- Ordering and billing processes and the best way to contact one another

Invite local farmers to school lunch to sample the foods you prepare.

Seeing your program in action and meeting the students will further your relationship. And who wouldn't want to have a nice lunch with kids?

Start small and have partners.

Rather than buying a large variety of products, or setting up relationships with many farmers, start with 1-2 farms and 3-6 products you use regularly. Make sure that your local products are noticed. Enlist the help of teachers and parents to help advertise your local purchasing in school newsletters, menus, and posters.

Stay in Touch. Don't forget to keep farmers in the communication loop. Invite them to take part in the process.



Vermont FEED is a Farm to School partnership project of NOFA-VT & Shelburne Farms. Learn more @ vtfeed.org.