




Transformation

 MERCY FOR ANIMALS

**Northwest Arkansas
Market Analysis**



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Market Analysis: Northwest Arkansas

April through June 2024, Transformation™ contacted 75 prospective buyers in Northwest Arkansas to determine whether they purchased produce from local farmers, their requirements for produce vendors, and the crops that interested them. Our survey focused on Washington, Benton, Madison, and Carroll counties.

This report outlines the process of contacting prospective buyers, discusses the sectors surveyed and the response rate by sector, and lists products of interest in the region for future consideration.

Methodology

We gathered contacts through online resources, including chamber of commerce membership directories and web searches such as “farm-to-table Bentonville”; used the **local food guide**; and relied on local knowledge and connections. Outreach focused primarily on local businesses likely to use specialty mushrooms or other fresh produce. We made contact through virtual or in-person meetings, email, or telephone.

On June 3, most businesses received an initial email asking them to respond to five questions. We sent the email to multiple businesses in the same sector with language tailored to each business. For example, if a local restaurant advertised their commitment to local sourcing, the email mentioned their support of local farms. Other email segments included restaurants that did not specify a focus on local sourcing, farms with community-supported agriculture programs, caterers, and farmers markets. After this initial outreach, we eliminated seven businesses from further contact due to undeliverable email. Of the remainder, those who had not responded received follow-up emails on June 11 and between June 21 and 24 reminding them to complete the survey. This tactic yielded eight survey completions, seven via a reply to the email and one via telephone when the business replied asking for a call rather than communicating by email. Two other businesses completed the survey by telephone because of an existing relationship with the surveyor or no available email address. Three businesses completed the survey in person, also because of existing relationships. Four additional businesses completed the survey in person after we visited them and asked to speak with someone about local produce purchases. Only one business opted out of future communication without answering the survey questions.





Response Rate by Sector

We surveyed eight sectors for this report, and their response rates are as follows:

- Food hubs – 100% (one of one)
- Farmers markets – 71% (five of seven)
- Grocers – 50% (two of four)
- Community-supported agriculture programs – 33% (one of three)
- Caterers – 25% (one of four)
- Restaurants – 17% (eight of 47)
- Culinary programs – 0% (zero of one)
- Food banks – 0% (zero of one)

The overall response rate among relevant businesses with seemingly viable email addresses was 26%.

Survey Results

Three restaurants and a caterer responded that they did not source local produce.

Requirements for supplying produce to a business or market vary.

- One restaurant stated that they had no requirements of produce vendors.
- **Conventionally grown** produce can be sold at several locations, but one buyer requires **organic certification**, two others require produce to be **certified naturally grown** at a minimum, and one restaurant avoids produce treated with conventional pesticides. One grocer allows vendors that use organic practices but are not certified, provided that they sell less than \$5,000 total per year.
- Three respondents require **liability insurance**.
- One farmers market requires proof of **health inspection** and adherence to local **cottage food laws**, while another requires vendors to follow **local health codes**.
- Two farmers markets require vendors to grow what they sell (**no reselling**), although one accepts produce that would otherwise be unavailable as long as the farmer is up front about its origin.
- Two buyers require a farm visit for all vendors, and one restaurant owner stated: **“When I do business with you, I want to come see your farm and shake your hand.”**
- One grocer requires GAP certification.

Farm-to-sale distance requirements vary a great deal among respondents, with farmers markets appearing to be most specific.

- One farmers market is open to vendors within 150 miles.
- One farmers market has no defined distance requirement but will approve non-local vendors only on a case-by-case basis.
- One farmers market requires produce to come from within 60 miles.
- One farmers market requires vendors to live and farm in Washington, Benton, Madison, or Carroll counties.
- One farmers market and one restaurant require produce to be grown within 100 miles of them.
- One restaurant recognizes the state’s high land prices as a barrier to affordable local produce. The restaurant is therefore open to regionally grown produce, although they prioritize Arkansas produce.

- One restaurant defines “local” as grown within 20 miles and is open to produce grown elsewhere in Arkansas or in southern Missouri.
- Two grocers define “local” as grown within 400 miles, and one of the two narrows the requirement to the state of Arkansas.

Several crops appear to be oversupplied in the region:

- microgreens
- lettuce
- tomatoes
- peppers
- cucumbers
- yellow/crookneck squash
- zucchini
- onions
 - Onions seem not to be in demand at local farmers markets; however, three restaurants would like to source onions locally but currently cannot.



Buyers mentioned some crops that they would like to source locally but currently cannot source affordably in the quantity or of the quality needed:

Vegetables	
asparagus	kohlrabi
beets	okra
black-eyed peas	onions
carrots*	peppers (specialty hot varieties)
corn	potatoes
celery	purple hulled peas
endive	radicchio
fennel	radishes
garlic	squash (acorn, butternut, patty pan)
heirloom tomatoes	
Fruit	Value-Added Products
any	buckwheat
berries	dried beans
cantaloupe	mushroom jerky
	tofu
Greens	Other
<i>lettuce^</i>	specialty mushrooms
salad greens	

*Bold indicates that more than one respondent mentioned the type of produce.

^Italics indicates that multiple buyers, including two larger buyers, noted that several farms were growing hydroponic greens and the market appeared to be saturated. While these crops were on one respondent’s wish list, unless a specific buyer has been identified, this may not be a good crop choice.

Key Takeaways

- If you are interested in becoming a farmers-market vendor, be sure to pay attention to application open and close dates each year. Some markets accept vendors on an ongoing basis, but others accept applications only during specific months. Most area markets begin accepting applications in December and January, and they typically close in February or March. More than one market said that they would consider applications for specialty crops for which they did not have a vendor, even if the application came in outside their stated time frames.
- **Spring Creek Food Hub** aggregates local produce and distributes it to many area businesses and institutions. Taking advantage of this great local resource can reduce transportation costs and delivery times because a large volume of produce can go to one location. They also offer educational opportunities and technical assistance to farmers.
- The **Northwest Arkansas Local Food Guide** is a directory of more than 130 local farms and farmers markets intended to connect consumers with local food. Farms looking to be included in the publication can register [here](#). The guide is also a great resource for understanding what other farms are offering and assessing which crops may be over- or undersupplied.
- The Center for Arkansas Farms and Food publishes a list of Northwest Arkansas farms that sell directly to the public on their [website](#) along with instructions on getting listed.
- One restaurant buyer who purchases from 15 local farms recommends selling everything by the pound so pricing and quantity are easily understood.
- One farmer who has been a market vendor for 40 years and sells in four additional channels recommends that beginning farmers get as much hands-on experience as possible. He suggests talking to other farmers and visiting their farms; looking at what is sold at farmers markets and paying attention to pricing, volume, and varieties; and learning by working on a farm if possible. The **Center for Arkansas Farms and Food** offers several opportunities for hands-on learning, including farm school, farm apprenticeships, and various classes and workshops.

