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INITIATIVE 2: Promote Local Food

The popularity of locally grown and raised food will continue to build next year, experts told *SN*. Many retailers are starting to differentiate themselves from competitors by either expanding their selection of locally grown items, or redoubling their efforts to highlight and promote their selection.

In fact, according to market research firm Packaged Facts, local foods will be a \$7 billion-a-year business by 2011, and 73% of consumers think such items important.

There's super local, very local and local products at Alberta Cooperative Grocery in Portland, Ore., a store that touted local products before there was even a buzzword for it. The co-op started highlighting local products when it opened in 2001, but this year it developed new signage to designate the different tiers of local it offers, which are designated as products from within 30 miles, from within 300 miles and from the Pacific Northwest region, said marketing manager Jocelyn Furbush.

Specifying the distance food has traveled is likely to be very appealing to consumers, said Jim Hertel, managing partner, Willard Bishop consulting, Barrington, Ill.

“Without the distance specification, ‘local’ is a pretty vague term,” he said. Further defining the local benefit will be essential, said Hertel, because the closer the proximity, the more the freshness and the taste of produce are implied.

Alberta is also connecting customers to farmers and producers, said Furbush. It does this through the food as well as by highlighting farmers, featuring their photographs and telling their stories, both in the store and in its newsletter.

The co-op carries local deli and bakery items, sausages, shelf-stable foods like pickles, and more. But the program really comes alive through samplings, with at least one held per week. “We definitely see an increase in sales when people can taste and smell the food, and talk to the people who make or grow it,” said Furbush.

As a next step, the co-op will soon begin hosting field trips to the farms to educate consumers and help them appreciate how food is grown.

“Taking shoppers into the field demonstrates real pride in sourcing,” said Hertel, “and can help them better appreciate top-quality fruits and vegetables.”

Local food doesn't get any fresher than the produce sold at Bi-Rite grocery store in San Francisco. Last spring, the store began growing its own produce in a one-third of an acre garden in Sonoma County, north of the city.

By the end of the summer, the farm had produced more than 3,500 pounds of tomatoes, 500 pounds of eggplants, 400 pounds of peppers and 200 pounds of basil. Winter crops, including kale, escarole, beets and chard, are now for sale in the store.

“We started the garden because I wanted to get a better understanding of farming and growing, so I could understand our suppliers, and because I wanted our staff to learn,” said the store's owner, Sam Mogannam. “I also wanted to provide something that continues to separate us from all other grocers, and to share our stories and firsthand experience with our customers.”

Before he started his garden, Mogannam was already selling produce from his parents' Placerville farm near Sacramento, slaughtering his own pigs and growing limited crops in a rooftop garden.


And nothing is wasted. Last summer, he used some of his cosmetically less-than-perfect produce to make dishes such as gazpacho, as well as a garbanzo and heirloom tomato salad, to sell in the store.

Coming up, Mogannam would like to create some shelf-stable products from his garden's fare. In order to grow sufficient vegetables, he's considering buying a four-acre garden, where he'll grow tomatoes, potatoes, garlic and greens.

— *Amanda Baltazar*

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