



# Garrett Growers Magazine



Feeding Our Neighbors, Helping Our Farmers, Protecting the Land

2023 Volume 1, Issue 1

[www.garrettgrowers.com](http://www.garrettgrowers.com)

[garrettgrowers@gmail.com](mailto:garrettgrowers@gmail.com)

## Restaurants & Groceries

Co-op of local farms forms to address business needs for quality and quantity without the headache for business managers



### Partnering in Local:

Changing the World Together

Calling all local produce buyers and growers to join forces



## The Local Buying Trend: It's Not Slowing Down

Local produce sales skyrocketed during Covid, and they are not slowing down. Local is here to stay.

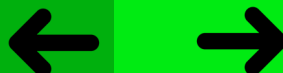


## The Northern Loop

Building A Food Distribution System in Central WV and Western Maryland

Garrett Growers partners with agencies, businesses, and farmers to aggregate local produce

### Spotlight on Local: With Lester Litzle





# Table of Contents



**Restaurants & Groceries..... 3**

**The Northern Loop..... 5**

**The Local Buying Trend..... 7**

**Spotlight on Local with Lester Litzle..... 8**

**Value Added Sales..... 9**

**Partnering in Local..... 10**





# Restaurants & Groceries

## Local Distribution Making Local Easy



For decades, some local restaurants and grocery stores have been buying from local farmers, but the amounts were not always significant compared to the total amount of produce purchased by the businesses. Additionally, for every restaurant or grocery that did purchase local, many more did not.

In 2007 and 2008, a group of farmers began researching the issue by talking to many restaurants and grocery stores in the area. What they found was that buying local presented a number of problems. Businesses cited the following issues:

- Restaurant managers had to keep track of purchasing from many different farms
- There was no consistent system of record keeping
- There was no consistency in the varieties of an item (ie many different types of lettuces)
- Varieties offered by local farms weren't as optimal for restaurants and grocery stores
- Quality was inconsistent from week to week
- Availability of products was not dependable
- Safety measures and sanitary handling varied drastically between farms

In 2009, this group of farmers started a co-op to address these needs, with the goal of making the purchase of local produce easy for restaurants and grocery stores. The Garrett Growers co-op was formed to specifically address the needs of restaurants and grocery stores that had been observed. Equally important to the co-op was the desire to help local farmers throughout the region find additional outlets for sales to help make agriculture sustainable in the area. Any farm in the region can join the co-op if they are willing to adhere to the co-op's rigid standards for food safety, handling, and growing.





## Restaurants and Groceries Continued

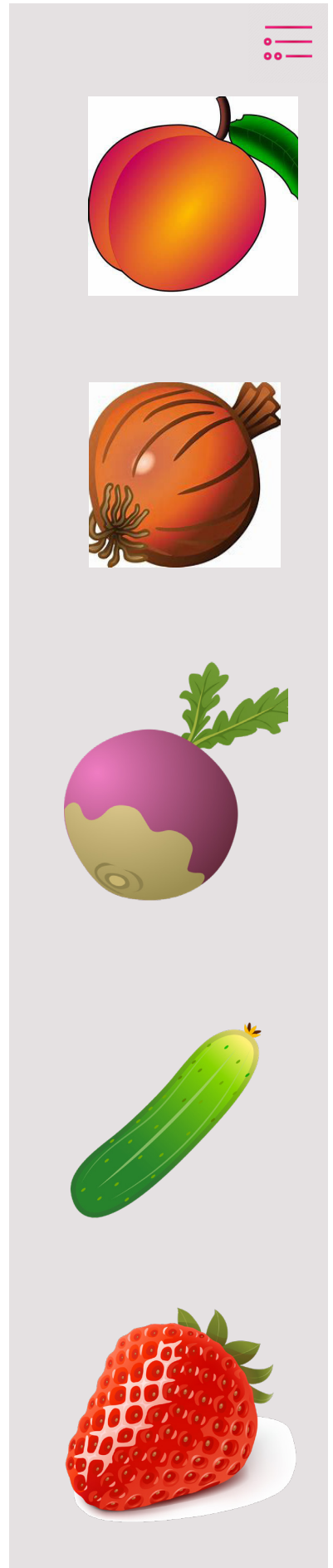
By forming a co-op, farms could pool their produce so that larger quantities of items could be offered than were available on a single farm, thus making the availability of products more dependable. Additionally, it eliminated the need for businesses to keep track of purchases from many different farms, because billing is handled by the co-op exclusively.

Additionally, the co-op became a self regulating body of sorts by requiring all members to adhere to safety regulations and sanitary handling. Farms which don't comply cannot sell through Garrett Growers. The co-op spent years in its early days perfecting varieties specifically to hold up in a restaurant or grocery setting. Today, most of the co-op farmers grow similar varieties to allow for consistency.

Garrett Growers is now in their fourteenth year, and distribution has gone four months out of the year to seven, with last year seeing sales of hundreds of thousands of dollars for local farmers.

**BACK**

**NEXT**





# The Northern Loop



## Building a Food Distribution System in North Central WV and Western MD

In 2023, a group of farmers, organizations, and retailers, spearheaded by Garrett Growers, met in Phillipi, West Virginia to enjoy a farm-fresh lunch and talk about a distribution system to aggregate local produce across central, West Virginia.

“We’ve had these conversations before, but this time it was different. This time there was the commitment, plus the opportunity to make this happen,” commented Jethro Macks, Extension agent.

The concept of distributing local produce throughout the state is not new. There have been summits, workshops, research grants, and the launching of a pilot program to do this very thing. But not without “hick-ups” along the way.



Distribution of produce from local farms to local businesses sounds easy. But in reality, there are many “spokes in the wheel”. It’s a balancing act. Supply from local farms has to equal demand from businesses, but farms can’t over-produce because of the costs associated with loss. Farms have to commit to growing the amount businesses want, and businesses have to buy it all in the short window of harvest. Businesses, on the other hand, buy according to their own sales, so the demand ultimately comes from, not the buyer, but the buyers’ customers. That is something that cannot be controlled by the system.

In the end, there is always loss, but who takes the loss? Whether it is the farmer, the business, or the distribution entity, whoever takes the loss runs the risk of not staying afloat. Of course that produce could be sent for processing, but there again is another “spoke”, in that a processing facility has to have the ability to process that product and have a demand for it, and there has to be a form of distribution to the facility.

The end customers want local produce, but clearly, costs in local are higher because local farmers can’t grow produce on small farms and sell at the price of big farming. This is yet another “spoke” in that wheel.

**“We’ve had these conversations before, but this time it was different”**

For years the obstacles have been crushing, but this time things are different. Having been involved in distribution for Turnrow, a former grant-funded distribution system, Garrett Growers already has the aggregation capabilities in place to make distribution throughout Central, WV possible.

“It’s a game changer,” commented Macks.





## The Northern Loop Continued...

So what really is different? Garrett Growers is a farmer’s co-op, which means it is owned by the farmers. Being farmer owned means farmers can control distribution, and they have a vested interest in its success.

In the past distribution systems have tried to operate like grocery distributors. “It doesn’t work”, stated Macks. “The reason is because with that system, the distributor has to buy product and hold it in warehouses.”

Garrett Growers dances to the beat of a whole new drum. With their system farmers are involved with the whole operation. Produce is picked when it is ordered, so it is shipped fresher than it would be for the traditional distributor.

“When businesses order, we text the farmers and let them know to run out to the field and pick”, stated Hannah Frazee, Garrett Growers Coordinator. “With our system, most produce is on the truck in less than 24 hours from picking.”

“We understand local produce because we are the local farmers. We have the truck, the system, and a proven track record, so this time it can work”, reiterated Frazee.

... summer of 2023, plans are in place for Garrett Growers to run a Northern Loop, which will allow farms

along the route to sell their products to businesses along the loop. Partners, like Audra O’dell have joined the team. O’dell will provide a hub that will store and aggregate produce dropped off by Garrett Growers farther south than the loop, and in turn provide a drop off for more southern farmers to add product to the loop. This was the substance of the meeting in Phillipi, many partners committing to make the Northern Loop a reality.

For this to be a success, it will take the support of many players, but particularly, the buyers. The buyers are like the glue that holds the spokes in place. At this point it all rests in the hands of the businesses and their commitment to buy local. There isn’t a state-wide distribution system in place yet. But the Northern Loop holds strong promise for its start.





# The Local Buying Trend: Not Slowing Down



It's no secret that customers are wanting local these days. Covid brought shortages, and along with them, the realization that without local farms produce may not be available. With no choice but to turn to local, customers who were accustomed to buying non-local produce came to understand what long term local buyers already knew, local produce is superior to the alternative, both from a health, and a taste, standpoint. Even though produce being shipped in from other places is now plentiful, many of those new local buyers are sticking with the local farms. "Covid was a wake-up call. Without our local farms we are all vulnerable", commented Joelle Mosser, a local produce worker.

And, it isn't just in the grocery arena, either. More and more, customers are demanding local at restaurants. The proof is in the numbers, as local restaurants that are able to advertise that they are using local produce are also seeing increased sales from it.



"Buying local means less waste," stated Karissa Harding, another local restaurant manager. "The prices are higher, but by the time I buy from my distributor and throw away the spoiled and unusable portion of the product, the prices run about the same. And, customers can tell the difference because the local produce we have delivered here at the restaurant is exceptionally fresh. You can't get that from a long-haul distributor," said Harding. "Plus, it makes me feel good to know I am helping keep agriculture in the area sustainable."

So, why aren't more restaurants simply going local? "Some of the major distributors bully smaller restaurants by telling them they will lose their contract if they buy anything elsewhere. It's a scare tactic, and restaurants need to band together and refuse to allow them to continue this type of intimidation," stated Sawyer. "There are other restaurants with those same distributors buying local produce weekly."

One thing is true, if we want local agriculture to thrive, there has to be support from the community. Not just the end customers, but also the restaurants and grocery stores that are putting the food in the mouths of the customers. It's just good business. In the end, restaurants and groceries buying local means there are more dollars in the community to come back to those businesses in the form of sales.



"Customers don't always verbalize their desires. They just go somewhere that offers them," commented fresh produce marketing agent Shawn Sawyer, who is also a former restaurant manager. "Restaurants that are now having lower sales cut costs by buying from big box distributors, and customers can tell the difference in the product, so they go elsewhere. It is a vicious downward spiral. When I took over as manager, our restaurant was in that spiral. We switched to all local produce and our sales increased by 20% in our first year," Sawyer commented. "That's part of the reason I work in local produce promotion today."





# Spotlight on Local with Lester Litzle



**His farm is located in the coldest region of Maryland, yet despite that fact, last year, he sold a million dollars' worth of produce.**

*Question: How many employees to you have?*

Litzle: Only one hired hand. The rest is all family labor.

*Question: Explain what you do from harvest to pick up by the Garrett Growers truck.*

Litzle: Produce is picked, washed, and packaged. We receive a list that allows us to know what to pack for which business. We pack produce on the list into crates and label the crates for the business. When the Garrett Growers truck arrives, they pick up the crates and leave me an invoice. Farmers with the Co-op need to have a sanitary building for washing and storing produce. Proper sanitary refrigeration is also required if the farmer is selling items that require refrigeration. That runs into some cost, but it is well worth it.

Lester Litzle runs a 12-acre produce farm in Gorman, MD. He is a Garrett Growers Co-op farmer with five high tunnels, six green houses, and 5 acres in field crops. His farm is located in the coldest region of Maryland, yet despite this fact, last year, he sold a million dollars' worth of produce.

**Only one hired hand. The rest is all family labor.**

*Question: How do you overcome the challenges of a colder climate?*

Litzle: I utilize the green houses and high tunnels to their fullest capacity, which allows us to get produce out several months earlier and several months later than would be possible for field crops. We generally have produce April through the end of December.

*Question: Where do you sell your produce?*

Litzle: We sell at my brother's produce stand, the Tailgate Farmer's Market and Garrett Growers. Garrett Growers makes up about half of our sales.

*Question: Do you make less profit through Garrett Growers since sales are wholesale and farmers also pay a percentage?*

Litzle: Yes, I do make less profit per unit, which means I have to grow more to make the same sales. But, Garrett Growers gives me another outlet for sales. We are an agricultural community with a low population, which means that sales to individuals in the area are limited. With so many farms competing, it would not be possible for all of us to stay in business if we only sold to farmers market buyers. By selling so much through Garrett Growers, it makes us sustainable.

**BACK**

**NEXT**





# Value Added Sales



Customers want LOCAL  
Easily give them LOCAL



"It is surprising how many local canned products we sell. It bumps up our bottom line."  
- Mitzy Mart



Firefly Farms  
International Award  
Winning Goat  
Cheese

The sought after  
goat cheese!

Delivered Free by  
Garrett Growers



If you want it and we don't  
have it, tell us.

We have special  
relationship with the  
farmers!

- Farmer-owned Garrett  
Growers

[www.garrettgrowers.com](http://www.garrettgrowers.com)





**Local Farms  
Local Businesses**



**Local Buyers  
Building Local Economy  
Building Local Community  
One Team  
Many Players  
Building Local Together**

**[www.garrettgrowers.com](http://www.garrettgrowers.com)**

