

LOCAL FOODS PROCUREMENT TIPS

FOR SCHOOL DINING SERVICES

Solid, long-term relationships are built on trust and compatible goals. Three major components will make your search for local products most productive. First, provide detailed information about your operation to share with a prospective farm products vendor. Second, be ready to ask basic questions of the farmer or other supplier. Third, in order to fully utilize fresh fruits and vegetables which are seasonal, and to build a mutually advantageous relationship with a local supplier, be prepared to be flexible and creative. It's worth the effort!

STEP ONE: PREPARE BASIC INFORMATION ABOUT YOUR OPERATION FOR FARMER OR DISTRIBUTOR CONVERSATIONS.

1. Provide your name and contact information, and the name and location of your school or college. Include names and contact information for any other staff that the farmer may need to work with.
2. Indicate the best way to reach you, and best times to call or visit.
3. Do you want as many types of food as you can get, or are only some items of interest? (This can change over time, but it's helpful to mention your priorities now.)
4. Provide a rough estimate of your weekly orders, either by dollar amount or by product volume. (See product charts at www.marylandsbest.net/pdf/directory.pdf, page 6-7. Choose a month when seasonal foods are bountiful, and do not include items like bananas and oranges which cannot be grown locally.)
5. At how many locations do you need deliveries, at what time, and on what day?
6. Do you serve meals in the summer? (If yes, tell the farmer the dates, delivery locations, and size of orders for summer vs. regular school year.)
7. How does the farmer become an official vendor for your operation? What paperwork is required in advance, and for each delivery? (Can the packing slip serve as an invoice or must bills be sent to a separate location?)
8. How and when do you prefer to place orders (fax, email, phone)?
9. How long will it take farmer to get paid?

STEP TWO: TALK WITH POTENTIAL SUPPLIERS. Ask these questions and prepare others as needed.

Option 1: Talk with a local farmer.

1. Find prospective farmer/suppliers in your area through the searchable database at www.marylandsbest.net, county agricultural websites, or local farmers' markets; contact local Agricultural Marketing, Extension or Economic Development offices; or call the Maryland Department of Agriculture Marketing Services at 410-841-5770.

2. Is the farmer interested in, or already selling to, colleges or schools?
3. Tell the farmer about your operation and then find out more about his/hers. Give the farmer the basic information you prepared above.
4. What products does the farm sell? When are these products available for sale?
5. Does the farmer have a delivery truck and the ability to deliver regularly?
6. Would the farmer pick up products from other farms to deliver at the same time?
7. Does the farmer require a minimum purchase per delivery location, or per invoice?
8. How does the farmer address food safety issues?
9. Can you visit the farm?
10. Other questions you want to remember to ask -

Option 2: Talk with a distributor or other non-farm vendor about securing local items.

1. Can the vendor provide a list of local farms from which products have been procured in the past, and a sense of what local foods will be available, and when?
2. Can the vendor provide you with promotional materials from the farms whose products they sell?
3. Can the vendor give you a list of the local items that were offered to customers in the past year?
4. Does the vendor have a system in place to alert you to which products are in season and available each week?
5. Will the vendor pick up local products at the farm gate and deliver them directly to you? If not, how are locally grown foods tracked or segregated in the warehouse?
6. Will products be delivered to you in boxes which note the farm of origin, or which identify in some way where the items were locally grown?
7. How does the distributor address food safety issues?
8. Can you visit the farm and the distribution center?
9. Other questions you want to remember to ask-

These tips were adapted by the Maryland Department of Agriculture, National Marketing Services for the Maryland Farm to School Workshop, July 2009, based on previous work by the Massachusetts Farm to School Project. For more information, visit www.marylandfarmtoschool.org, phone 410-841-5770, or email marylandsbest@mda.state.md.us.