

Building Sustainable Communities

Local Food for Local People

By Richard Berkfield

Spring marks the start of another growing season, with all of the delicious and nutritious food produced from our fertile soils. Unfortunately, many of us are not enjoying this bounty for a variety of reasons. As more and more people reconnect to their food and the soil and hands from which it comes, we need to make sure that all of our neighbors have the opportunity to do so as well. This vital connection has the potential to bring us together as strong communities to overcome many of the economic and environmental challenges that threaten the health and well-being of all of our residents.

Fortunately, for those of us without the space, time or green-thumb for gardening, we have a lot of very talented, hard-working farmers whose very passion is to grow food for us to eat. There is a farmers' market almost every day of the week: Wednesday in Brattleboro; Thursday in Townshend; Friday in Bellows Falls and Walpole; Saturday in Brattleboro; and Sunday in Putney. Often seen as the exclusive stomping ground of yuppies and hippies, farmers' markets are, plain and simple, a place to find fabulous food grown right in our community. And they are a valuable source of income for our farmers.

Let's face it, we all should be eating more vegetables, the fresher the better, but many of us simply can't afford the retail prices that our farmers need to charge to make a living. The food system just isn't set up in a way that supports farms, consumers and communities. For the past five years, we at Post Oil Solutions have been asking what we can do about this. And as a result, we basically set out to do the impossible: to figure out how to better bridge the gap between farmers who need a reasonable price and consumers who need to get the most for their money.

How can this be done? We've asked around, you've told us what you want. People want a market with a community focus: that is located close to home, has reasonable prices, accepts EBT (formerly known as food stamps), involves residents from the immediate neighborhood in the market's continued development, and gives helpful hints and recipes for cooking and storage. We saw this market as one where the community *itself* can be the middleman.

I'd like to introduce you to the Neighborhood Market on Elliot Street. The Neighborhood Market is a market for people on a tight budget located right here in downtown Brattleboro that is set up every Tuesday from 4-6pm between June 26-Oct. 2. We have worked with the farmers to sell at a reduced price, and this arrangement satisfies them because we ask that market-goers commit to the entire fifteen-week market season. A guaranteed market helps farmers run a more efficient business. A lower price is better for consumers. And the commitment is an opportunity for people to really commit to eating fresh produce for the fifteen-week season. With farmers, market staff, and other participants eager to share their favorite tips and recipes, eating your veggies will become a joy and a connection to food, farmers, and community. For specific details about the Neighborhood Market, visit www.postoilsolutions.org.

This Neighborhood Market supports new farmers in developing new markets, so we won't be taking markets away from existing farms. Our goal is to get more people to buy directly from their farmers and to get more community participation from individuals and organizations to support that change. From the beginning, we reached out to other organizations who are concerned about the health of their clients and staff to become partners in creating a fun and sustainable market. One of our new partners put it this way: "We are interested in working together to offer our clients better access to improved health and well-being." It is this collaborative spirit that is contributing to the market's success and making it fun! We are thankful to our volunteers and partners. Contact us if you are interested in learning more about organizational partnership and volunteer opportunities.

Finally, as the market continues to grow, we are raising funds so that we can make it the best market possible. It takes community support to build a community-based food system, one that provides food for all and a fair return to farmers. Please consider joining us in making sure that all of us can come together and eat healthier this summer. Visit www.postoilsolutions.org to contribute to the Neighborhood Market and claim your gift, which ranges from a one week share at the Elliot St Market to a two-night farm stay at Amazing Planet Farm in Williamsville.

If you are interested in joining the market, contact Hanna Jenkins at theneighborhoodmarket@gmail.com or (802) 258-8902 for more information.