

Who grew your garlic? Andrew Coppolino on market vendors versus farmers

Andrew Coppolino · CBC News · Posted: Sep 22, 2018 7:00 AM ET | Last Updated: September 22



Do you know who grew those string beans or new potatoes? Farmers' markets will be full of fresh fruits and vegetables this fall and Andrew Coppolino breaks down what to look for to make sure your money is going where you think. (Josee St-Onge/CBC)

I counted the fresh produce that's available at this time of the year, according to Foodland Ontario, and found about 50 different fruits and vegetables. Many of the items are available at local farmers' markets, but a question remains for me: how sure am I of where the food actually comes from?

It's obvious from the name that a farmers' market is a place where farmers sell their products. But traditional farmers aren't the only vendors at this province's nearly 200 markets; virtually every market includes what are often called "resellers."

That's not bad, necessarily, but it's not always easy to tell the difference between the two.

Vendor tiers

The St. Jacobs Farmers' Market, for instance, has both growers and resellers among its stands. [On its rate sheet](#) it distinguishes between four different types of produce vendor: grower, grower/buyer, co-op grower and annual produce.

Growers are defined as vendors who only sell produce that they grow on their own family farms throughout the growing season. That last part is key; when the produce they grow is not in season, they are allowed to do some reselling of that item on a case-by-case basis.

Grower/buyers pay more rent for their market stall than growers. To qualify, they must grow produce on their own farm but can supplement up to 50 per cent of the products they sell with Ontario produce purchased at another Ontario farm. The caveat is: "located near their farm," with no specific definition of "near."

Co-op growers are vendors who partner with other local growers.

Annual produce is a category reserved for resellers who don't grow anything of their own, but "produce sold cannot be in season in Ontario."

Kitchener, Cambridge, Guelph, Stratford

Serving about 10,000 market-goers on a Saturday, the Kitchener Market has 24 farmers, 14 are "My Pick" certified, the other seven are resellers. [The MyPick farms](#) (at any farmers' market) are clearly identified and Kitchener Market is working on a new system to identify the others.

[In their vendor information package](#), the Cambridge Farmers' Market says it requires vendors to display a sign with the name of their business and ensure that "all produce must be of good quality," but at the Guelph Market, [vendors must produce a minimum of 65 percent "homegrown" products](#) and can resell out of season.

It says resellers can purchase from "a third party, and/or farm products where less than 65% of the products are home grown."

At the Stratford Farmers' Market, [resellers and wholesalers "are prohibited,"](#) according to vendor guidelines. The Stratford Slow Food Market also features local producers.



A food vendor sells fresh berries at the St. Jacobs Farmers' Market. Where did they come from? You need to ask. (Kate Bueckert/CBC)

In support of resellers

All of these conditions are clear for vendors, but it's not information obvious to customers. Where there may be tiers of vendor fees charged, there is no signage to indicate to buyers what sort of merchant they're dealing with.

Shopping at a farmers' market isn't a zero-sum game; it's not black and white, just like the idea of "local food" is not black and white. Buying local food is great and supports local economies but it's only available for part of the year.

Where are we going to get local broccoli in February? We're not.

There likely wouldn't be a year-round farmers' market anywhere in Ontario were it not for produce from warmer climates. There wouldn't be the foods —like eddoes or pomegranates — that are important to a wide variety of cultural communities for whom they are essential ingredients. The issue of underselling farmers aside, lower priced produce from resellers may be helping some people afford fresh food.

A large part of the issue is one of clarity and understanding which stand is reselling produce and where it's from.

I've heard the rumours that some resellers might dress in Mennonite-like garb or hire Mennonites to sell their goods. I have certainly encountered resellers posing as farmers after travelling to the food terminal in Toronto to collect produce. Asking them a few questions about an apple's origin and variety (including asking if the vendor put the ID stickers on them!) shut them up quickly. So I moved on to a vendor I knew.

Seek clarity? Ask questions

So it's *caveat emptor*: buyer beware. Decide what your priorities and values are about buying "local food" and do your research.

Know what's in season and what's grown here and make your purchases accordingly. Look for the "My Pick" sign that certifies the farmer — but recognize that even these farmers can share the produce they sell. Recognize, too, that we wouldn't have a lot to eat if we didn't stock the shelves with produce from elsewhere.