

## **Organic Products at Michigan Farmers Markets, Susan Smalley, Department of CARRS, Michigan State University**

Farmers markets are seen by many as the flagship of the local food movement. Within Michigan, the number of markets has more than doubled from about 70 in the early 1990's to an estimated 200 during 2008, with more markets planned to open in 2009. Existing markets work to attract a broad array of vendors, including certified organic farmers and farmers who use organic practices but are not certified. Michigan State University (MSU) researchers have tracked farmers market numbers and provided educational programs and technical assistance to farmers markets dating back to the 1960's. In 2007, MSU was integrally involved in founding the Michigan Farmers Market Association (MIFMA).

This presentation draws together results from several research efforts that collectively describe the extent of organic products at Michigan farmers markets and the interest of Michigan residents and farmers market shoppers in purchasing organic products. Data sources include:

- Rapid market assessments (RMA's) conducted during 2005, 2008, 2007. For each, an assessment team was assembled, comprising various mixes of MSU faculty and/or staff, MSU students, farmers market managers, MIFMA members and other volunteers. Team members received basic instructions before spending one entire market day at the host market. While there, team members conducted customer counts, administered customer survey questions using dot poster methodology, and made structured market observations. Results were compiled into a written report that was submitted to the host market and posted on line at <http://www.farmersmarkets.msu.edu/ForMarketManagers/FarmersMarketRMAList/tabid/3359/Default.aspx> . Questions in several of the RMA's elicited customer interest in organic products.
- Michigan State of the State Survey, conducted by MSU's Institute for Policy and Social Science Research, is a quarterly telephone survey that reached a stratified sample of nearly 1000 Michigan households that represent Michigan's diversity. A series of questions on the October 2008 survey round explored respondents' perspectives about farmers markets and local food.
- Through Project GREEN, MSU supported and helped to plan and conduct a Michigan Organic Summit on 1/11/2007. Some of the summit conclusions and recommendations were specific to organic food at farmers markets.
- Organic Agriculture in Michigan, 2006 Survey Report, asked organic farmers to specify the types of marketing they used as well as the general location of their markets.

A review of the results of these efforts provides the basis to draw several general conclusions:

- About half of Michigan's organic vegetable and fruit farmers and about 10% of organic grain/field crop farmers market in part via farmers markets.
- Current farmers market customers indicate their interest in having a broader range of organic vendors and products from which to purchase.
- Although Michigan food shoppers in general show some interest in being able to purchase organic, pesticide-free and hormone/antibiotic-free products at farmers markets, the importance of these factors is lower than many other aspects of their decision about whether or not to shop at a farmers market.
- Michigan organic farmers and advocates recognize farmers markets as a significant opportunity to educate consumers and are concerned that many markets do not enforce legal limitations for vendors to advertise and sell products as organic.

