



# Ohio State HCS News

HORTICULTURE & CROP SCIENCE IN VIRTUAL PERSPECTIVE - THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

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## Appreciating Locally Grown Foods



OARDC scientist Dr. Matt Kleinhenz collaborates with Dr. Senay Ozgen in an organic lettuce research plot.

There is a growing trend in Ohio in which local farmers and chefs are coming together to offer hungry citizens a taste of what grows just 30, 60 or 90 minutes away from their favorite restaurant. This chef-grower trend - which has become increasingly popular in other parts of the country - reflects local efforts to restore, in an increasingly globalized food economy, the vital connection between those who grow our food and those who prepare it. The Buckeye state - with its 11 million residents, good road system, and numerous urban centers surrounded by farmland - may just have the right ingredients for this recipe.

"There's a growing appreciation and interest from the consumer for locally grown materials," said **Matt Kleinhenz**, a researcher with the Ohio Agricultural Research and Development Center (OARDC) and a vegetable-crops specialist with Ohio State University Extension. "People will seek out these local products for different reasons - they want more selection, they want a sense of knowing where their food comes from, or they simply prefer local foods. And that number of people seems to be growing."



Farmers markets offer Ohio's consumers the opportunity to purchase locally produced foods.

It is, indeed. The 2004 Ohio Survey, conducted by Ohio State's Department of Human and Community Resource Development, found that 59 percent of the nearly 2,000 respondents said they would be willing to pay at least 10 percent more for foods grown locally. Today, these people don't have a whole lot of choices. "The mainstream food production and distribution system, with its consolidation of food dollars into a shrinking number of corporations,

typically offers what sells in largest volume," Kleinhenz explained. "While product units in grocery stores increase, suppliers tend to decrease. For example, Arizona and California supply 90 percent of the U.S. vegetables, such as lettuce, during the winter months."

Another reason farmers and chefs are reaching out to each other, Kleinhenz said, is the fact that this relationship can make good business sense. "First of all, it's an entrepreneurial opportunity," Kleinhenz pointed out. "Farmers recognize there is a new market, and that it can be very rewarding to work directly with chefs. Restaurants, meanwhile, are trying to differentiate themselves, and one way to do that is to offer local products."



For farmers extending the growing season is critical to capturing the restaurant market.

The lettuce example comes in handy to illustrate this point. There are many, many types of lettuce. But because of different restrictions - cost of shipping, some types of lettuce don't travel well, etc. - restaurants can't get a good selection from food distributors. "That's when chefs say, 'We don't need material that has been shipped for three-four days. We can offer something different, fresher.' If they turn to local growers, they have other options," Kleinhenz explained. Besides, with increasing energy costs, relying on "fresh" vegetables from Arizona or beyond may not make economic sense in the future.

Local farmers don't always grow or produce the foods a chef is looking for. Tackling this and other challenges that may hinder effective chef-grower relationships in Ohio - such as distribution, reliability, supply volume, marketing and diversification - is one of the goals of the OSU Local/Regional Food Systems Network, a group of OARDC researchers and OSU Extension educators and specialists from throughout the state. The network's aim is to strengthen connections so that more local foods become available in Ohio, whether at the grocery store or at restaurants. Organizations such as Innovative Farmers of Ohio (IFO) and the Ohio Ecological Food and Farm Association (OEFFA) are also involved in this initiative.



Locally grown foods offer a fresh product that hasn't been shipped for three or four days.

Ohio State is also helping the local foods effort by conducting research aimed at addressing issues crucial to this section of agriculture. OARDC scientists are looking at what crops are best to grow, which varieties to choose, what inputs are needed for optimum production, what new crops can be introduced, and more. One key aspect, Kleinhenz said, is how to increase the growing season, which can be a limitation for Ohio growers wanting to supply to restaurants.

Diversifying Ohio's agricultural production is another challenge, as many chefs are looking for much more than corn, soybeans and wheat for their culinary creations.

"One important thing about this trend is that it can benefit smaller farming operations, adding different dimensions to the face of Ohio agriculture," Kleinhenz said. "As new farmers come in, this helps to create relationships and knowledge transfer. There's strength in diversity. As a region, it's good to have both small and large farms, different scales of operation to face ups and downs in the economy."

Story by Mauricio Espinoza. Photos courtesy OARDC/OSU photographer Ken Chamberlain. Web editing by [Victor van Buchem](mailto:Victor.van.Buchem).

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