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Locally grown food making huge gains

By [John Boyle](#)

JBOYLE@CITIZEN-TIMES.COM

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In the health-conscious mountains, locally grown food is a very healthy industry, with \$14.5 million in annual sales.

But the potential market holds an untapped promise of up to \$451.9 million in sales, according to a report released Tuesday by the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project.

That total comes with a caveat, however. To realize the potential, the region would have to build infrastructure such as slaughterhouses and processing centers.

But even the more conservative and realistic estimate of \$36.5 million in potential annual produce sales still represents the possibility of enormous growth for the mountains' 12,000 farmers.

"Local food is a huge national trend," said Charlie Jackson, executive director of the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project. "But here, the interest in local food is as high or higher than anywhere in the country."

The nonprofit advocacy organization's report, "Growing Local: Expanding the Western North Carolina Food and Farm Economy," was three years in the making. Researchers surveyed hundreds of sources, ranging from summer camps and school systems to hospital food service directors and grocery store buyers.

They found that demand far outstrips supply in the 23 Western North Carolina counties surveyed, with less than 1 percent of the food consumed grown locally.

That is beginning to change as consumers gravitate toward fresher, healthier foods.

"We've been buying broccoli, collard greens, zucchini, cherry tomatoes and offering them in our cafés for about a year," said Howard Masonheimer, food service director at Mission Hospitals in Asheville, which has 6,000 employees and about 700 beds. "We actually buy the produce they don't sell at the farmers markets."

The hospital this summer also started a weekly tailgate market on hospital grounds. Mission has been dealing with Madison County Farms, a growers' cooperative that is

insured. That's one speed bump those looking to sell on a large scale must get over — securing proper insurance coverage.

But more growers are making those hurdles as business continues to boom at local natural foods stores such as Greenlife, Earth Fare and the French Broad Food Co-op.

Traditional grocer Ingles Markets also has boosted its marketing efforts, working with the sustainable agriculture project and identifying some products in its nearly 200 stores as locally grown.

"In addition to the quality of locally grown food, high fuel costs make it in everyone's best interests to procure locally grown food," said Ron Freeman, chief financial officer for Ingles. "We hope the relationship continues to grow — pun absolutely intended."

'We're looking at doubling our production'

The immense potential does not surprise local growers or consumers.

"Actually, we're looking at doubling our production," said Annie Louise Perkinson, who operates Flying Cloud Farm in south Buncombe County with her husband, Isaiah.

The couple works about seven acres, growing "everything from asparagus to zucchini." They market their crops themselves, either through tailgate markets, direct sales to groceries and restaurants or through a CSA, or community supported agriculture program in which families or individuals commit to buying local produce every week.

"We started with 30 shares, and we're up to 75 now and looking to go to 100 next year," Perkinson said. "We sell out. If you have a lot of diversity, the opportunity is great."

Carole Winkenwerder Anderson, who regularly buys produce at the Saturday UNC Asheville tailgate market where Perkinson sells, says buying local just makes sense to her. First of all, it supports local growers, helping them stay on their farms and preserve quickly disappearing farmland.

"And it just tastes good — it's so fresh," Anderson said. "It all may be a little more expensive, but to me it's worth it. It just tastes better."

While the report is encouraging, Jackson isn't encouraging everyone to start planting crops. Farming in the mountains is limited by terrain and seasonality (four to five summer months), available infrastructure and marketing opportunities, not to mention land prices that can reach \$25,000 an acre.

Farmers and groups such as Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project will have to continue to actively market food as locally grown and push for more institutions to use it.

"This isn't going to happen in the next year," Jackson said. "It's a process."

Most farmers know they're not going to tap into immense riches just because strong demand exists. Perkinson says an annual income of \$30,000 to \$50,000 is realistic but never guaranteed.

"It's still physically a lot of work and it's not a huge salary," she said. "But around here, you can sell what you grow."

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