

## Customers Demand Fresh Food...And Knowledge

(NAPSA)—Nationwide, shoppers are asking questions and becoming more connected to the sources of their food. They browse farmers markets, choose farm-to-table dining and spend their time and money visiting farms. Adventurous consumers even tend backyard chicken coops, providing themselves with their own source of fresh eggs and poultry; others weigh the advantages of buying organic foods. Whatever specific habits they may have stem from a popular demand for fresh, locally grown agricultural products.

Farmers are producing and selling more crops, livestock and other agricultural products directly to regional outlets and individual consumers than ever before, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) National Agricultural Statistics Service (NASS). The latest Census of Agriculture shows that 144,530 farmers nationwide sell their products directly to consumers, accounting for \$1.3 billion in food sales.

In 2012, 22 percent of products sold directly to consumers came from beginning farmers. "If they can get to a town or city, young farmers want to sell direct to consumer," says Lindsey Lusher Shute, Executive Director of the National Young Farmers Coalition. "Direct sales provide the best



**Local food and agritourism sales create jobs and strengthen communities. Plus, 97 percent of U.S. farms are family owned, according to the latest Agriculture Census. Pictured here: Heather Minter of C&T Produce in Stafford, Virginia arranges tomatoes at the USDA Farmers Market in Washington, D.C.**

margin on farm products and enable farmers to scale up gradually. CSAs and farmers markets are helping thousands of young people make farming a career." CSA stands for Community-Supported Agriculture.

More consumers are also seeking agricultural products from roadside stands, farmers markets and "pick your own" farms. In fact, the number of farmers markets has grown by 67 percent since 2008, and consumers can select from more than 7,800 listed in the USDA's National Farmers Market Directory.

Tellingly, local food has topped the National Restaurant Association's Top 10 Consumer Trends list since 2009.

The concept of selling agricultural products directly to consumers is not new. "Communities around the world have local markets, butchers and bakeries for fresh foods and local products," says NASS Administrator Joseph T. Reilly. "In the United States, as consumer demand for local, farm-fresh fruits, vegetables, meats and prepared foods continues to grow, farmers markets help reconnect rural and urban America."

Fans of local food often seek out agritourism as well, since these farmer-to-consumer transactions occur directly on the farm. However, in addition to fresh, locally grown food, agritourism offers consumers the added bonus of spending a day on the farm, where they can pick their own bounty and get a behind-the-barn-doors look at how their food is grown. Census data shows agritourism and recreational services from these operations generated \$704 million, up 24 percent since 2007. Farmers who sell directly to consumers are not only providing fresh food—they are passing down agricultural knowledge.

To learn more about the Agriculture Census, visit [www.agcensus.usda.gov](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov).