

## 1981 Season Report

Cris Pattison

It has been a year of successes, disappointments, and, most of all, LEARNING for those involved with the marketing project of the Natural Farmers' Co-op. What we have learned has led to some major changes in the project for next season and a more realistic look at what the near future will be for the growers who participate in the Co-op. A full report will be available at the Annual Meeting in March. In the meantime, here is a brief report of the 1981 marketing project.

Eighteen growers participated in selling through the Co-op this year. There was wide variation in the amount of produce each grower marketed, from a figure in the thousands of dollars to several under \$100. Although it was projected before the season began that \$25,000 of produce would be available for marketing, the gross sales figure at the end of the season amounted to \$10,771.67, due mainly to a lack of sufficient volume to supply our current buyers. The number of vegetables marketed exceeded 30 types, from corn to herbs to potatoes.

While most of the produce was sold directly to wholesale buyers, we sold to three farmers' markets each week from June through August, two in Potsdam and one in Massena. Even with all the bookkeeping headaches of keeping the records straight for the 18 growers and the 30-plus different vegetables, it seemed worthwhile to work the farmers' markets early in the season because of the retail prices we got there and the lack of competition with the early NFC vegetables. As the season wore on, however, the competition from other farmers in the area caused our sales volume at these markets to drop and we discontinued selling there. We did continue to sell by the bushel to individual consumers, to some food buying clubs, and of course to our regular 4 restaurants, 3 supermarkets, the Potsdam Consumer Co-op, and a few others.

The responsibilities for marketing were shared by the two VISTA volunteers, Cris Pattison and Valerie Ingram. In general, Valerie handled the record-keeping and contacts with the buyers (taking orders, arranging deliveries, etc.) while Cris worked with the growers to determine the produce that was available for the week and handled the advertising for the season. Both coordinators made deliveries, worked with growers at the farmers' markets, and kept track of operations at the warehouse.

In general, all our buyers were enthusiastic about the quality of the produce but often we couldn't supply amounts needed by our customers. This sometimes discouraged buying from us. The restaurants we sold to were usually willing to pay slightly more for the high quality than supermarkets. The major markets we had for "organic" produce was the Potsdam Consumer's Co-op and several individuals who bought from us at the farmer's markets and in bushel quantities for freezing and storing.

As a result of our experiences, the marketing project will undergo some major changes for the 1982 season. The growers decided to accept other-than-organic farmers, hoping to attract more growers for the volume increase they need and to provide a market for all small farmers in the county, not just those oriented to organic methods. This change in policy will mean a new name for the growers' group. An effort will be made to provide organic produce for those buyers who request it. The number of growers stands at 6-8 and the variety of produce is reduced to 8 vegetables, partly in an effort to simplify the marketing and partly to increase the volume of the most marketable crops.

In addition to these changes, the wholesale marketing project will take up half the time of one marketing coordinator. The other half of that position will be taken up with doing marketing education work for all growers in the county who want advice on marketing on a smaller scale than wholesale, such as at farmer's markets, roadside stands, pick-your-own fields, and other alternatives. There will be a Horticultural Advisor, as well, who will be able to give individualized advice to growers who are trying to expand their production in order to market fruits and vegetables. We found in the course of surveys sent out to growers in the county that at this point there are not many growers who are ready to sell produce on a large scale, but there are several who would like to expand gradually until they are earning part or all their income from fruit and/or vegetable sales. Most of them indicated that this point what they need most is more help with specific problems in production and marketing. The Natural Farmers' Co-op will be working with Cooperative Extension to provide these small-scale growers with workshops, printed materials, and advice to make a start in helping more people in St. Lawrence County provide more of our fresh produce.

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