

Grow Local

An Initiative Supported By The Salt Spring Island
Agricultural Alliance

April 2022 - November 2022

Grow Local acknowledges that these projects were carried out on the traditional and unceded territories of the Hul'qumi'num and SENĆOŦEN speaking Coast Salish peoples.

Executive Summary

The Grow Local project developed and coordinated several marketing programs for Salt Spring Island (SSI) agricultural products this past year. Through engagement with farmers and other key stakeholders, the Grow Local project investigated the opportunities to increase the demand for local food in consumer, retail, wholesale and institutional markets. Developing this market expansion program involved relationship building and problem solving to create new avenues for scaling up production and selling local food on SSI.

Local Salt was a key collaborator and provided an online marketing and sales platform that was integrated into several of the Grow Local trials. Additional technological development of the online platform is required to facilitate efficient wholesale orders and to streamline both vendor and customer use of the platform. In the future, moving Local Salt's food drop off and pick up location to The Root would allow for sales to be scaled up, and would provide increased collaborative potential between Local Salt and the Salt Spring Farmland Trust (FLT).

Providing local food to school meal programs on the island is the most promising avenue for scaling up the supply of local food. The existing school meal program at Salt Spring Elementary (SSE) has dedicated financial resources in place for local food, and with provincial funding soon to be in place, there is a significant opportunity to increase the supply of local food in schools across the island. There are already several avenues in place that support local food programs in schools, as well as interest from school food buyers to further collaborate and expand to other schools and additional farmers to increase the overall capacity of this market.

Scaling up agricultural production on SSI will require both investment in coordination capacity, as well as the infrastructure to receive, store, process and distribute crops efficiently. It will also enable The Root to become the Local Food Hub on SSI providing numerous benefits to both the agriculture and local community. The key is to continue collaboration with food producers and seek further investments in selected marketing avenues.

The most important next step is to convene the farmer community and prospective buyers this winter to plan for the 2023 growing season and create memorandums of understanding that further develop business relationships.

This final report for the Grow Local project describes the impetus for developing a local food marketing program, the marketing avenues investigated through five trials, the lessons learned and resulting recommendations. Metrics for the program are provided in the appendices as well as a list of the contributing farms, businesses and organizations. Funding was provided by Island Coastal Economic Trust and Salt Spring Island Community Economic Sustainability Commission. The Grow Local Project was initiated by the SSI Agricultural Alliance and worked in collaboration with an Advisory Committee of its members.



Fig. 1 Foodraiser Produce Box Contents

Background

The Grow Local project developed and coordinated several marketing programs for Salt Spring Island (SSI) agricultural products this past year. Through engagement with farmers and other key stakeholders, the Grow Local project investigated the opportunities to increase the demand for local food in consumer, retail, wholesale and institutional markets. Developing this market expansion program involved relationship building and problem solving to create new avenues for scaling up production and selling local food on SSI.

The SSI Area Farm Plan (AFP) Renewal, completed by the SSI Agricultural Alliance (AA) in 2020, identified the need to connect producers with a diversity of buyers. Over the last year, the Grow Local project initiated the AFP's recommendation to design and implement a marketing program which may include:

- Collaborative crop planning to meet buyers needs;
- Diversified marketing opportunities via grocery stores, farmers markets, neighbourhood and island wide box programs, covered market for extended sales etc.;
- Online inventory and sales platform; and
- Print and online resources to connect producers to eaters.

In 2021, Transition Salt Spring developed a SSI Climate Action Plan (CAP), which included several actions that were also implemented by the Grow Local project, including:

- Work to develop a school meal program that uses primarily local food;
- Encourage food distributors to carry local and regional food;
- Support and participate in provincial and regional initiatives to strengthen regional food systems;
- Support the expansion of farmers' markets, food retail outlets specializing in local food, local food delivery services and online local food sales; and
- Develop supply systems to facilitate more retail, commercial, and institutional use of local food.

Marketing Avenues Investigated

After the initial research and outreach phase of the Grow Local project from April through June, five marketing avenues were investigated from July through November.

Trial 1. Localsalt

Local Salt is an online marketplace for local food growers and processors to sell their products directly to customers on SSI. Customers purchase their products online through the platform, and then pick them up from the Farmers Institute each Tuesday. Grow Local collaborated with Local Salt to increase the availability of local produce on the platform, through both retail and wholesale listings.

Local Salt was a key collaborator and provided an online marketing and sales platform that was integrated into several of the Grow Local trials. Additional technological development of the online platform is required to facilitate efficient wholesale orders and to streamline both vendor and customer use of the platform. In the future, moving Local Salt's food drop off and pick up location to The Root would allow for sales to be scaled up, and would provide increased collaborative potential between Local Salt and the Salt Spring Farmland Trust (FLT).

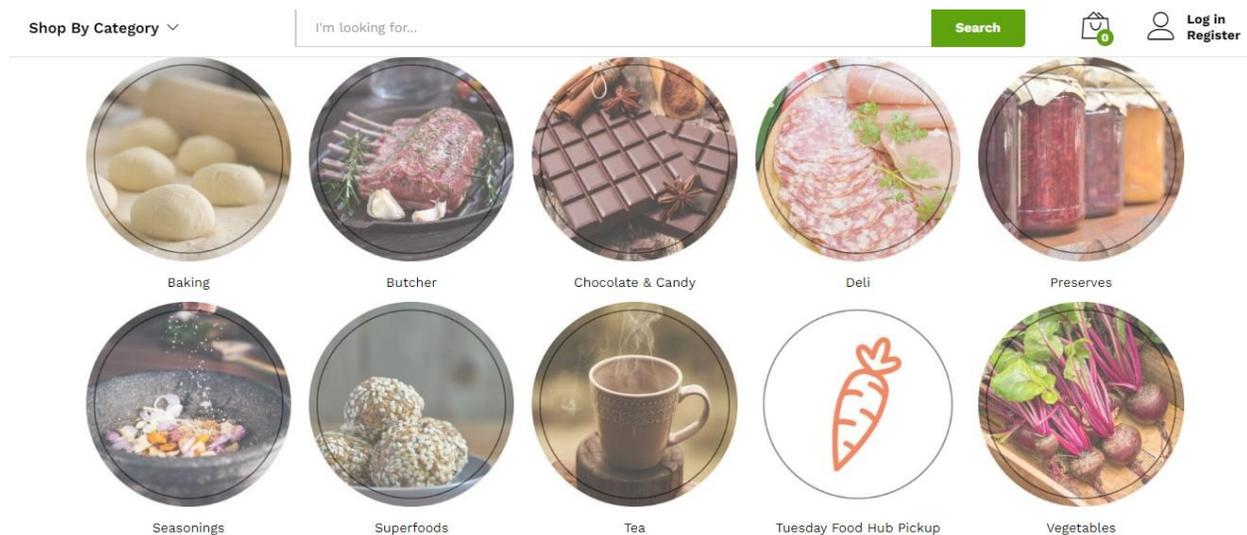


Fig. 2 Local Salt Home Page

Key Findings

- Further development of the online platform is needed to facilitate coordinated sales between multiple farmers.
- Upgrades to the storefront and backend would streamline user experience.
- Cross marketing between Grow Local and Local Salt across social media, the Fall Fair and the weekly Salt Post newsletter increased sales and customers.
- Produce sales increased significantly after the Tuesday Farmers Market had closed for the season.
- Sales were most successful when products were unique on the platform. Having multiple farms listing similar products on the platform is not likely to be successful for farmers, but having enough farmer presence to provide a wide selection of fresh produce is key to creating a well stocked marketplace experience for customers.

Trial 2. Crops Sold by Grow Local

This trial sold crops from multiple farmers on Local Salt under the Grow Local brand. To encourage farmers to sell on Local Salt, Grow Local offered administrative assistance onboarding. Farmers provided crop lists to Grow Local and only harvested the crops when an order was placed. Grow Local updated the product listings on Local Salt, processed the payments, sent invoices and delivered farmers' crops to the Farmer's Institute on Tuesday for pick-up.

Key Findings

- Both in the trial and through research on Food Hubs in the region, it was apparent that the majority of farmers are reluctant to take on the learning curve of using new online sales tools. We received feedback from our participating farms that eliminating the administrative time required for them to list products made them willing to participate.
- The timing of the launch of this trial was too late in the busy growing season, which resulted in many farms who initially showed interest in the project not participating.
- Delivery/drop off coordination will be essential if this program expands. The order amounts were typically small and it is not economical for farmers to deliver small orders.

- Because crops were sold under the “Grow Local” brand, some farmers that were approached were hesitant to list for fear that their crops would be sold alongside lower quality products from other farms.

Trial 3. The Foodraiser

The Foodraiser tested coordinated growing and selling with multiple farmers. It also investigated the interest of local gardeners to grow and donate food to a community cause. Farmers and gardeners were asked to grow root crops that have a long shelf life and can be planted late into the season. Farmers were paid wholesale rates for their crops which were sold at retail prices on Local Salt and through the Fresh Sheet project (see Trial 4 below). Gardeners donated their crops to Grow Local. The profits from the Foodraiser were donated to the FLT to help fund programming at The Root in 2023.

The Foodraiser had four main offerings: bulk root crops, a \$30 Harvest Box, a \$50 Bounty Box, and a \$30 Giving Box, which the customer did not receive but was instead donated to community services for food insecure individuals on SSI. The boxes were filled with root crops along with a selection of seasonal vegetables provided by the participating growers.

This trial was developed in collaboration with The FLT to test the functionality of The Root as the island’s Local Food Hub. Crops were received, processed, stored, packed and delivered from The Root. Data was collected and observations were recorded leading to recommendations for the facility (See Appendix 2 for Recommendations regarding The Root).

Key Findings

- The Root has all of the necessary components for a successful Food Aggregation Hub.
- Investment in additional equipment will be helpful for streamlining food aggregation activities.
- The humidity and temperature of the cooler was ideal for storing the root crops. which remained fresh for the duration of the project.
- There was a high level of community buy-in to support a philanthropic event.
- The school programs were the most consistent and high volume customer.
- Sales increased after the Tuesday Market ended for the season.
- The larger produce boxes (\$50) were the most popular offering.

Trial 4. Fresh Sheet

The Fresh Sheet trial tested the potential of selling crops from multiple farms to wholesale customers to provide larger and more consistent quantities of fresh produce. Farmers sent in a list of their crops, quantities and prices each week. Grow Local compiled the list and sent it out to customers, who then placed their orders. The project also coordinated the harvesting and delivery of crops with the farmers. Sales transactions were processed through Local Salt.

Key Findings

- Despite our attempts, none of the grocery stores on the island became Grow Local customers. Several reasons accounted for their non-participation: the stores were not interested in participating; their price point was too low to make it feasible for the farmers; and the quantities we had available from farms was too low.
- Some farms sell regularly to the grocery stores, but either as a small proportion of their overall sales, or as a backup market when crops are not able to be sold in retail markets. Most farms that were approached for this trial were not interested in selling at wholesale prices.
- The farms that did participate in this trial did not want to sell more than a small percentage of their overall crops at the prices grocery stores were willing to pay.
- Feedback we received from a farm that did participate in this trial was that they would allocate no more than 10-15% of their overall crops to grocery stores, because they needed retail prices for their business to be viable.
- Timing was a major limiting factor of this trial, as most of the restaurants that were approached were interested in the project but were already too far into their main selling season to alter their menu or purchasing strategy. They communicated that winter or early spring would be a more ideal time to start planning and engage with them.
- Without a streamlined system for coordinating orders, harvests and delivery, the trial required a lot of administrative time communicating with both farmers and customers over the details of the orders.

Trial 5. School Meal Programs

This trial collaborated with Salt Spring Elementary School (SSE) to introduce more island grown food into their existing school meal programs. The food program coordinator had programs and grants already in place to purchase local food for a number of meal kits that went home to families, as well as in school meals.

5.1 End of School Celebration

An annual event that fed 200 students plus staff. In 2022 they decided to do a salad bar featuring a wide selection of local produce.

Number of Farms Involved: 8

Total Spent on Local Ingredients: approximately \$2,000

5.2 Breakfast Program

This was a collaboration with a Walk, Ride or Bike to School initiative to help encourage kids to choose low carbon transportation. The program featured bicycle blenders the students pedaled to blend smoothies made from local ingredients. Berries were gathered by the community who were paid for their harvesting. Local apple juice and greens were added to the smoothies.

Number of Farms Involved: 2

Total Spent on Local Ingredients: approximately \$350

5.3 Meal Kits

This program runs twice a semester and kits are given out to 100 families each time. Students take the kits home and cook the recipe for their family, so recipes are appropriate for kindergarten to grade six. Salt Spring produce is heavily featured with all other ingredients sourced from BC producers. Grow Local helped source ingredients for two meal kits: Father's Day and Thanksgiving.

Farms involved: 6

Total Spent on Local Ingredients: approximately \$1,500

5.4 Halloween Pumpkin Soup Lunch

An annual event that fed 200 students plus staff. The students contribute herbs, pumpkins and squash from their school garden for the soup, with other ingredients provided by local farms.

Farms involved: 2

Total Spent on Local Ingredients: approximately \$250

5.5 Harbour House School Chef's Conference

Due to the bird flu, there was a last minute change for one of the venues of this conference. Grow Local helped arrange and present at a farm tour and lunch at Paradise Within Farm. The conference was a gathering of chef's teaching in schools and Home Economic teachers from schools across B.C. They traveled to many different farms and food producers across SSI and learned about the importance of local food and how to build programs at their schools.

Key Findings of the School Programs

- Programs are very well received due to the ongoing advocacy in the school garden programs at schools across Salt Spring.
- Provincially and locally, there are ongoing projects that are educating teachers in local food and there is a growing interest from students, families, and teachers to incorporate local food into school life and curriculum.
- The provincial government is currently discussing the details of a collaboration between the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Agriculture to provide funding for a school lunch program across BC. This initiative will provide an opportunity to build on the relationships developed through Grow Local to incorporate locally produced food into these school programs at the planning stage.
- Due to last minute planning of the meals, crops were chosen just before the events launched. There is interest from farmers to be involved in winter planning sessions to pre-plan and grow larger quantities of crops for sale to school programs in the 2023 year.
- Not all of the budget available for local produce was used this season. This was mostly due to time constraints as the aggregation typically happened in a short window. Pre-planning would enable more of the budget be used to purchase food from local farms, and create opportunities for more farmers to support these community initiatives

Overall Findings

Starting the planning session during the winter is essential for increasing wider participation from the farming community. From our experience, encouraging farmers to be involved is a fundamental part of creating a successful agricultural initiative, but it was difficult to get farmers' attention while the growing season had already started as they had already decided on their marketing avenues and crops.

The economics of farming are very challenging. On SSI, profit margins for most crops are extremely thin, as farmers selling locally have to compete with large farms that have advantages in economies of scale or subsidized imports. Many farms on Salt Spring are small scale and often require a secondary income source to keep their farm operating. The number of customers on SSI who are willing or able to afford the higher prices for local food is also limited.

All the trials that were tested required a certain amount of administrative time and costs for the coordination role between farmers and customers. The main challenge is how to fund the coordination role in between such tight margins. From our research into Food Hubs, it appears that a combination of price markups (passed on to customers), and grants and funding from governments and institutions, are the standard method of paying for the coordination role necessary for most aggregation programs. While the challenges of funding a coordinated expansion of our local food supply are significant, they should not discourage further investments into building a stronger and more resilient local food system.

To support our local food system we need to leverage subsidies that fund healthy food choices which help lower the island's GHG emissions and increase resilience to climate change. The benefits of developing a fully functioning Local Food Hub and working collaboratively across the food system to bring higher quantities of local food to customers across Salt Spring are numerous and worth the investment.

SSI locally produced food:

- Provides healthy, fresh food to both residents and visitors;
- Supports tourism and the aesthetic rural character of SSI;
- Contributes to the SSI brand of a place to find *good food* at local markets and farm stands;
- Enables students to learn more about how food is produced and discover the taste of healthy, fresh produce;
- Offers young entrepreneurs business and marketing experience for a commodity that everyone buys;

- Contributes to community services by donating surplus crops of healthy food to organizations that support individuals and families in need.
- Contributes to a reduction in GHG emissions by reducing transportation costs associated with imported food.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have emerged as being the most promising from analyzing the successes and lessons learned over the past eight months.

Our main recommendation for scaling up local food production in 2023 is to create a part time paid position that will develop a program of coordinated growing and selling involving multiple farmers and customers, with The Root as the Aggregation Hub of locally produced food.

1.1 Coordinate Aggregated Growing & Selling

Throughout the winter this role would facilitate planning sessions with both existing and new farmers and customers to help establish business relationships and plan for the upcoming growing season. Several potentially large customers have expressed a desire to have a steady supply of local crops available throughout the season and for specific events. The farmers that we have been working with have expressed openness to planting specific crops if they had purchase commitments from customers in advance.

The most promising customers are the elementary schools on the island. The food program coordinator at SSE has done extensive work setting up their contract position within SSE, including creating a replicable framework and list of resources for other schools on the island. There are consistent budgets available for school meals from a wide array of funding opportunities, and large amounts of food are required for each event. There is a significant opportunity to incorporate local food into other schools on the island by replicating this school food coordinator role. If enough schools were on board with regular local food events, there is potential for a full time farmer to grow and provide for the schools. Working with the SSI farmers this winter, scaling up the number of schools and events sourcing food from local farms are the priorities.

1.2 Develop The Root

Over the winter this role would work with the FLT to help develop the business and logistical models for establishing The Root as Salt Spring's Local Food Hub. Evaluating how to set up the physical and logistical systems necessary to receive, process, store, distribute & sell crops is an essential step for aggregation to be possible. The information learned this year from operating at The Root can serve as groundwork to help inform the continued set up and use of the space (see Appendix 2). Involving Local Salt in the planning of these systems is recommended as they have developed a small but functional system of purchasing, distribution and sales but their ability to expand is limited at its current location. Hosting Local Salt at The Root would provide a valuable opportunity to continue the momentum of programming at The Root throughout the winter and to support Local Salt to be able to scale up.

Appendices

Appendix 1. Metrics

1.1 Local Salt Metrics

Total Number of Sales through Local Salt	66
Total Income Generated through Local Salt	\$3,416
Average Weekly Sales over the 15 week trial	4.4
Highest Number of Sales In A Week	18
Number of Products Listed	33
Total Page Views	647

1.2 Sold By Grow Local Metrics

Total Number of Sales	29
Total Income Generated	\$346
Average Sale Amount	11.9
Number of Unique Customers	23
Time Commitment Per Week	2 hours

1.3 Foodrasier Metrics

Total Income	\$1,382
Total Farmer Income	\$610.75
Profits Donated to FLT	\$771.25
Bulk Root Crop Sales Income	\$522
Produce Box Income	\$860
Number of Sales	40
Value of Food Donated	\$240
Time Commitment	3 - 10 hrs / week

1.4 Fresh Sheet Metrics

Total Number of Sales	11
Total Sales Income	\$1993.75
Number of Customers Approached	12
Number of Customers Onboarded	7
Number of Farmers Approached	79
Number of Farmers Onboarded	7
Weekly Time Commitment	4-8 hrs/ week

1.5 School Meal Metrics

Number of Farms Worked With	12
Overall Money Spent on local ingredients	\$4,700
Time Commitment	5-15 hrs/week

Appendix 2. Recommendations for The Root

After using The Root for processing and aggregating crops during our trials, we provide the following recommendations for optimizing the space for future use from the agriculture community.

Further equipment installation is needed to prepare the space for processing high volumes of produce.

Food Storage and Preservation

- Additional shelves are needed to hold a higher volume of crops that are appropriate for storage in the lower basement.
- Additional walk-in coolers and chest freezers in this area would allow more crop storage capacity without having to use the kitchen cooler, which also maximizes workflow to have all crops in the same space they are stored and processed
- A scale that can handle large weights is needed to document quantities of crops as they come in. Having an analog version that is portable is also recommended

Washing and Packaging Equipment

- Spray tables or foot operated washers that are used outside of the basement storage with a simple greywater system would allow for efficient washing of slightly dirty produce in smaller quantities.
- In addition to the sink that has already been installed, a larger produce wash station is required within the basement to handle large quantities. This should include a wash table that can hold large quantities of produce and a system for dealing with greywater generated. Drying racks or bins will also be needed
- A large barrel washer is recommended for processing large quantities of root crops

Storing Crops

- The Root is well suited to store large quantities of different types of crops.
- The dry ambient storage of the basement maintains a very stable temperature relative to the outside. During the summer when we were testing temperature and humidity in the basement the temperature stayed constant at 18 degrees Celsius even during the heatwave where outdoor temperatures were in the mid 30s.
- The basement was an ideal space to store squash and pumpkins, as well as to allow potatoes to dry out before being placed in the walk-in cooler.

- The basement is too warm to reliably store root crops without mold developing quickly (potatoes were growing eyes and beets were showing rot at the stem after 2 weeks of storage in rubbermaid bins in the basement).
- The walk in cooler is an excellent space for storing root crops for long periods of time. Root crops in rubbermaid bins to maintain humidity lasted reliably for over one month without noticeable losses.
- The walk-in cooler is an excellent storage space for crops that will perish quickly that need to be stored for a short period of time before being transported to their destination.

Appendix 3. Participant Acknowledgement

Farms

- Bright Farm
- Backwoods Farm
- Paradise Within
- Heavenly Roots
- Quarry Farm
- Forest Gardens
- Northend Farm
- Holly Farm
- Salt Spring Sprouts and Mushrooms
- Duck Creek Farm
- Laughing Apple
- Ruckle Heritage Farm

Funders

- Island Coastal Economic Trust
- Salt Spring Island Community Economic Sustainability Commission

Other Collaborators

- Harbour House Hotel
- Caitlyn Pal
- The Farmland Trust
- Robin Jenkinson
- Transition Salt Spring
- Michelle Nisbin, Simon Fraser University
- Dr.Soma, Simon Fraser University
- Pat Reichart + Closing the Supply Gap
- On The Rise, Climate Grief + Action Festival

Appendix 4. Marketing & Promotional Materials (Separate File)

This report was prepared by Polly Orr & Nicholas Adamson-Jones

November 30, 2022