

Growing Success

District is Helping Residents Grow Local Food, Spur Economy

CLAY CENTER, Kan. – The way Jay Sleichter figures it, the more competition he sees at the area’s farmers markets, the better for his own business.

“To me it’s just boosting our sales. It’s not competition,” said Sleichter, owner of Jays Jellies, Produce and More. “It just gets more people involved and more people selling things and more diversity. It gets more people to the markets. Our markets have been growing because of that.”

In 2012, staff in the River Valley Extension District in northcentral Kansas worked with more than 40 growers, among them Sleichter, who regularly sells his goods at markets in Manhattan, Clay Center and Concordia.

Two years earlier, district horticulture agent David Coltrain developed a Commercial Enterprise Conference to help local growers form their own plan for selling local food. The event has been very successful, attracting presenters from several states and growers from well beyond the River Valley Extension District, which serves Clay, Cloud, Republic and Washington counties.

“I say we have at least 40 growers in five counties (including Marshall County) and we have nine farmers markets,” many of which are newly-opened, Coltrain said.

Clay Center grower Jay Sleichter says the District Extension office is key to the growth of farmers markets in the area.



The workshops include lessons on how to manage high tunnels more effectively, and efficient growing techniques, according to Sleichter.

“I’ve learned a lot just by having different growers to share ideas with... ‘hey, what’s working for you, what’s not working for you,’” he said. “I really have enjoyed the other things I haven’t thought about, such as growing raspberries and blackberries. I listen to several people present about that and that’s something that we may venture into.”

Sleichter said the growth of farmers markets in his area is a good sign for local business.

“The more people we have growing local produce really helps our local economy,” Sleichter said. “It helps people eat fresher food; helps people help each other. It’s been really neat to see more people showing up at farmers markets who are now growing things to sell.”

Coltrain said the work he’s doing in the extension district is not geared to traditional farmers market goods such as fruits and vegetables. For example, the Commercial Enterprise Conference has

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provided help with marketing such specialty products as cheese, bread and buffalo meat.

“Growers always like to talk about the production end, but a lot of times they don’t think about the marketing and management, so that’s what I want to emphasize,” Coltrain said. “It takes a lot of time to take care of all these different types of crops that people can grow.”



Sleichter says he recognizes the value to his business as a result of his home county being in an extension district.

“He (Coltrain) is helping so many more people than if he were just in one county,” Sleichter said. “In the River Valley Extension District, having a horticultural person there has really helped the market gardening, there’s a lot of new enterprises taking up (including) local produce markets in Concordia, Farm Fresh fruit stands, roadside stands.

“And I think it’s basically because [the district] is sharing knowledge with us, and people are willing to take that risk after seeing that they can do this, and seeing other success stories and trying it for themselves. There’s been a lot of growth in our area... more people growing local produce, which is good for everyone, including our local economies.”

At left: David Coltrain says that the interest in horticulture has grown quickly in the River Valley Extension District.