

By Charles Johnson

NET GAIN

Georgia software benefits online markets nationwide

Stop by Athens, Ga., and a pioneering spirit bubbles up at the Locally Grown market among the hubbub of activity from growers delivering product and consumers picking up orders. Of all the 300-or-so U.S. farmers markets now trying online sales, this was the first.

It should surprise no one that Athens gave birth to something unique in the food world. Home to the University of Georgia, the town has an eclectic funkiness akin to Asheville, N.C., Portland, Ore., and Madison, Wis.

Mystical place. "For years now, Athens has been known as this mystical place, thanks, probably, to the many nationally-known rock bands that have come out of here," says Eric Wagoner, an avid gardener and professional software developer who came up with the online market idea.

Wagoner came to town fresh from New Mexico Tech, where he studied astrophysics, to take a job developing software for utility companies. His hobby and part-time job became growing and marketing fresh vegetables from a one-acre plot at his house.

►**Left:** These D'Avignon French breakfast radishes from Roots Farm show the high-quality veggies that growers near Athens, Ga., produce.

►**Below:** Eric Wagoner, working outside an Athens cafe, developed the online farmers market software. See it for yourself at LocallyGrown.net.

"I soon became aware of the risky nature of the speculation in selling at traditional farmers markets," he says.

On rainy or chilly days, buyers stayed home rather than go to the Athens farmers market. When the Georgia Bulldogs played a Saturday home football game, market attendance plummeted and parking got tough. In addition, growers never knew how much product they would sell and often wound up hauling much of it home, resulting in waste.

Wagoner thought there had to be a better way for farmers to sell what they produced, whether it might be vegetables, meat, eggs, or milk. He put his software-developing skills to work on the problem. His first effort was designed to help a half-dozen Athens-area growers have a midweek alternative to the traditional Saturday market, selling mostly to restaurants attracted by the new local food trend.

Second shot. The group discovered they were too small to deliver the steady, much too cheap supply Athens restaurants demanded. Wagoner refined the project. His new idea: allow consumers to products online, which would let growers know exactly how much they would sell each week. That technique, unique for the food business, quickly caught on among folks in Athens and started a brand new kind of farmers market.

"This let our growers experiment a little more than they could at the traditional market, where they tended to choose to grow less risky varieties and stay away from exotic heirloom things. Now they can try something different on a small plot that you'd never find at a traditional farmers market, throw it on the site, and see if it sells or not," Wagoner explains.

Rapid acceptance. "Customers told us they liked this better than the traditional Saturday market. Being able to mull over what was offered for a couple of days helped them plan menus and make better decisions about what they wanted to buy. When they went to traditional farmers markets, they tended to buy the first things they saw or they felt rushed to get to the best tomatoes or whatever. Online marketing takes all of that out of the experience," Wagoner adds.

Growers flat-out love the online system. "We really enjoy it. It shortened the amount of time we have to spend at the market. We can get in and out fast. We don't spend five hours trying to sell a dozen cartons of eggs," explains Crystal Beacham, who runs Heritage Spots and Feathers near Statham, Ga., with her husband, Derek. ♦

►**Below:** Whether selling fresh turnips, like these from Roots Farm, honey, lamb, milk, or many other products, Locally Grown is a useful tool.





►**Above:** Tim and Alice Mills, among the first half-dozen growers using the Locally Grown market, say it's the base for their overall marketing plan.

"It's very easy to do and is very time efficient," says Sara Callaway, manager of Roots Farm, a vegetable grower at nearby Winterville, Ga.

To use the online market, customers go to the website, view the week's offerings from area farmers, and select what they want. In Athens, growers prepare what they know is sold and bring it to the market, where buyers pick it up and money is collected.

"I feel really fortunate to be able to take part in this," says Edna Rhodes,

a customer from Watkinsville, Ga. "I can't get quality like this in a grocery store. There are a lot of things to pick from, like green leafy vegetables and carrots. I even buy my dog treats here, and my honey, and even special things like Christmas cactus. The prices seem very reasonable, to me."

Local buyer Carol Baschon agrees. "It's wonderful for me. What we can get here is just amazing. Now I try to get most of my food from this market and also from the old traditional Athens Saturday market," she says.

Buying specifically what's needed appeals to customers like Baschon who shy away from committing to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) farms.

"I have an aversion to the idea of getting a CSA box that has whatever the grower chooses to put in it. Being able to order exactly what I want is important to me," Baschon explains.

Although online marketing takes impulse buying out of the picture, buyers spend more money than at traditional farmers markets, Wagoner says. "People actually spend quite a bit more money when they have time

►**Above:** Locally Grown provides growers near Athens, Ga., with an easy, efficient market, says Sara Callaway, manager of Roots Farm.

to plan out what they want. I've seen a couple of USDA surveys that show the average amount spent at a farmers market is around \$25. At our online market, it's \$38," he says.

"Some of our customers just buy eggs and milk. Some spend \$250 a week on a wide variety of things. All sorts of people like to shop this way."

Sales boost. Alice and Tim Mills use a mule-powered mill to produce grits, corn meal, and wheat flour sold through the online market. They say it's a good sales tool. "Word of mouth that started with Locally Grown helped us," Alice says. "Now we sell to 39 restaurants and nine retailers."

Wagoner first toyed with the Locally Grown idea in 2002. In 2007, he began selling it to other markets. Now at least 150 use it and about that many are testing it. For payment, Wagoner asks for 3% of the market's sales.

"There are 4,500 U.S. farmers markets. Less than 10% use it. There's plenty of opportunity," he adds. ■