



GORGE GROWN

food network



LABEL on box at this longtime GGFN vendor says it all: Members care about the soil as much as what comes out of it. At right, a fresh onion.



A
fertile
first
years

By **TRISHA WALKER**
News staff writer

Drive past Hood River Middle School on a late Thursday afternoon, and you'll see the colorful canopies and crowds that converge to make up Gorge Grown Farmers Market.

It's one of the area's most popular markets, with an entire range of food and food-related products from all five counties of the Columbia River Gorge.

Of all Gorge Grown Food Network's programs, Gorge Grown Farmers Market is its best-known. But it is only one of many.

GGFN wants to build a sustainable regional food system throughout the Gorge. To accomplish its mission of building "a resilient and inclusive regional food system that supports the health and well-being of our community," it helps farmers with skills and infrastructure needed to succeed, connects with educators and policy-makers, puts new businesses in touch with local food sources and even provides technical assistance.

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"We understand food and we understand the local community," said GGFN co-director Michelle McGrath. "People come to us all the time and say, 'I'm trying to launch my food business and I need to know who to talk to.'"

Gorge Grown Food Network got its start in 2006, the result of discussions that identified the need for area farmers markets following a showing of "The True Cost of Food" at the Columbia Gorge Earth Center. According to the GGFN website, "From these gatherings, the idea of launching a 'network' that would connect farmers to consumers, consumers to farmers, farmers to other farmers and to encourage more local food production led to what has been named Gorge Grown Food Network."

At first, the program operated under the umbrella of Columbia Gorge Earth Center, until receiving its own nonprof-

it status in December 2008. And its first project was Gorge Grown Farmers Market in Hood River.

"It was a small but enthusiastic group," said McGrath of that first summer, noting maybe 10 vendors would participate on a good market day. "It was smaller than a quarter of the size of the market now." But she added that the market served as a meeting place for like-minded people who were passionate about building the local food system.

Since that humble beginning, the program has worked to build a regional food system in the Columbia River Gorge on both sides of the river and is supported through a variety of avenues, including grants, donations, and its enterprises.

One of those enterprises is the Mobile Market, which McGrath called Gorge Grown Food Network's flagship program. The Mobile Market, just like the farmers market, grew from community input. Many people live in "food deserts," she said, having to drive an hour or more to get fresh produce. And because research shows that people generally are willing to only drive 5 miles to get to a farmers market, the mobile market gets fresh food to the people who may not have the opportunity to get it otherwise.

The Mobile Market program began with one truck, but this year has two, thanks to a grant from the USDA.

"We received an unsolicited discretionary grant from the USDA," McGrath said. "They contacted us and said they had heard we had a great program."

The Mobile Market truck can be found at many of the Gorge's area markets, but it is not there to compete with other farmers. Instead, it acts as an anchor for fledgling markets.

"Most don't have stable vendors because there's not a stable customer base yet," explained McGrath, who added that without a customer base it doesn't make economical sense for many vendors to set up shop. "Because we are there, customers know there will be a diverse amount of food (offered) if they come to the market. It helps build a customer base."

If a market is loaded with vegetables, the Mobile Market truck will sell fruit, and vice versa. "Fruit is our niche, but we sell vegetables too if there's not a lot offered at that particular market," she said. There are 13 markets in the five counties of the Gorge this year — some on the same day — and having two trucks helps fill the need.

This summer, GGFN teamed up with The Next Door Inc. to bring the Mobile Market to St. Mary's Catholic Church after Mass on Sundays. The Next Door's Cooperative Garden — Raices ("roots" in Spanish) — furnishes some of the produce sold at the St. Mary's market site. The garden's members are mostly Hispanic, and benefit from the same workshops and programs GGFN provides for all farmers — such as their technical resources and assistance.

"The collaboration makes sense on multiple levels," said McGrath. "They're one of our most important partners, and it's been great to have watched our relationship grow."



Photos by Kirby Neumann-Rea and Ben Mitchell

AT FARMERS MARKETS, consumers find not only fresh produce, but can converse with the people directly involved in producing those fruits, vegetables and more.

FARMERS MARKETS IN THE GORGE

Goldendale Farmers Market

Dates: May 11-Sept. 28
Times: Saturdays, 9 a.m.-2 p.m.
Place: Ekone Park, Goldendale, Wash.

Hood River

Dates: May 2-Nov. 21
Times: Thursdays 4-7 p.m.
Place: Hood River Middle School, 1602 May St.

MCMC Hospital Plaza Market

Dates: June 4-Oct. 14
Times: Tuesdays, 11 a.m.-2 p.m.
Place: MCMC Hospital, 1700 E 19th St., The Dalles

Mosier Farmers Market

Dates: June 30-Sept. 15
Times: Sundays, 4-7 p.m.
Place: Old gas station, downtown Mosier

Sherman County Farmers Market

Dates: June 30-Sept. 15
Times: Sundays, 11 a.m.-2 p.m.
Place: City Park, downtown Moro

Stevenson Farmers Market

Dates: June 22-Oct. 19
Times: Saturdays, 10 a.m.-1 p.m.
Place: Courthouse lawn on Highway 14, downtown Stevenson

St Mary's Church in Hood River

Dates: June 23-Sept. 15
Times: Sundays, noon to 2 p.m.
Place: St Mary's Church lot, 1501 Belmont Ave.

White Salmon Farmers Market

Dates: July 2-Sept. 24
Times: Tuesdays, 4-7 p.m.
Place: 320 E Jewett St., downtown White Salmon



FRESH PASTRY and the latest fruit — Gravenstein apples, in their 2013 debut — are examples of the cornucopia that is Gorge Grown. Bread, meats, flowers, herbs, and value-added products made locally can all be found at the markets, in addition to vendors providing meals. At right, a close-up of the cornucopia mosaic done by Hood River Middle School students last winter in partnership with Gorge Grown. The HRMS Community Kitchen is used each week during market season for classes on wholesome cooking.