

How you manage produce will have a huge impact on both your customers' satisfaction and on your produce expenses. Finding produce sources that offer reliability, quality and the variety of produce you demand will also be key in enabling your program to meet its objectives. What you purchase and who you purchase it from will develop over time.

## Produce Sourcing

FoodShare uses a variety of sources for fresh fruits and vegetables: directly from farmers, cooperatives and wholesale distributors.

When FoodShare's Good Food Box program began, the vision was to source high quality, unmarketable produce directly from farmers. This, in theory, would help to increase the income of farmers and make produce more affordable for Good Food Box recipients. The reality was that for a variety of reasons, this was easier said than done. Firstly, most farmers are integrated into large procurement arrangements making it easier to sell their whole crop to one source than it is for them to do business with a number of small operations.

As well, because the number of Good Food Boxes we were packing in 1994 was still relatively small, farmers found that the transportation cost negated any profits that they would earn by selling to us. Transportation is a huge consideration in product sourcing and is often the limiting factor to purchasing directly from farmers. For a single destination trip, most farmers need to sell at least \$1,000 worth of produce to make their trip worthwhile. Farmers who deliver to a number of customers in the same general area can afford to process smaller orders. Below is a list of different sourcing options and the advantages and disadvantages of each.

### *Direct from farmers:*

- **Advantages:** Fresh, local, no middle distributor allowing farmers to earn more per unit sold, less packaging.
- **Disadvantage:** Limited variety, must order enough to make it profitable for farmer to deliver, non-local items unavailable, inefficient mode of transportation via small truck, car, etc.
- **Farmer links:** Local Food Plus (Ontario): [www.localflavourplus.ca](http://www.localflavourplus.ca)  
Food Link (British Columbia): [www.foodlinknanaimo.com](http://www.foodlinknanaimo.com)  
Food Link (Ontario): [www.foodlink-waterlooregion.ca](http://www.foodlink-waterlooregion.ca)  
Food Link (Ontario): [www.kingstongreens.ca](http://www.kingstongreens.ca)



### ***Wholesale produce distributors:***

- **Advantages:** Great variety, imported cultural foods, low prices, one stop shopping, competitive pricing.
- **Disadvantages:** Local product not always available, buying produce can be challenging without a buyer who knows the distributors, large amounts of packaging.
- **Wholesale Links:** Ontario Food Terminal: [www.oftb.com](http://www.oftb.com)

### ***Cooperative distributors:***

- **Advantages:** Fresh, local, often offer greater variety of products, allows farmers to pool resources (transportation, storage, etc.), decreases competition amongst coop members.
- **Disadvantages:** Imported items not available.
- **Cooperative links:** Coop Ontario: [www.coopsontario.com](http://www.coopsontario.com)

### ***Produce auctions:***

- **Advantages:** Fresh, local, possibility of low prices, meet the farmers who grow your food.
- **Disadvantages:** You must find transportation for the produce yourself, possibility of high prices or unavailability of what you need.
- **Auction links:** Elmira Produce Auction (Ontario): [www.foodlink-waterlooregion.ca](http://www.foodlink-waterlooregion.ca).

## **Buying Practices**

Once you have found sources for your produce, it is important to create a buying strategy to help you make your purchasing decisions. For example, if a local farmer is selling spinach for double what you can pay for California spinach from a wholesale source, which do you choose? Below are the ordering priorities that FoodShare attempts to satisfy. If we had our wish, we would satisfy all of these ordering priorities. In general, we believe that increasing healthy food access, by distributing high quality, affordable produce, is our primary goal. Our other goals include supporting a local and sustainable food system, decreasing transportation, choosing fair trade products (when we purchase imported produce) and reducing waste.

### ***Priorities*** (in order of importance for our desired program goals)

- **Quality**
  - a) Acceptable size, no deterioration of product (mold, soft spots, rotting).
  - b) Used within appropriate shelf life (see appendix for storage guidelines for produce).



- **Value**

- a) Prices paid for conventional and organic produce are lower than current retail prices.
- b) Produce purchased directly from farmers should not be more than 10-15% more expensive than the price offered by a wholesaler.
- c) Organic produce should only be put into conventional boxes if the organic produce is not more than 10-15% more expensive than the price offered by a conventional wholesaler or conventional farmer (whichever is lower).

- **Appropriateness**

- a) Fruits and vegetables are known and used by the majority of cultural groups.
- b) Any unfamiliar fruits and vegetables are accompanied by recipes and information.

- **Local and Seasonal**

- a) Support local supply and distribution networks – purchase as much as possible as close to home as possible – Ontario first, then Canada.
- b) Feature in-season produce.

- **Sustainable Growing Practices**

- a) Certified organic (always for organic boxes).
- b) Support Local Food Plus certified producers (Ontario).
- c) Discourage genetically modified seeds.
- d) Encourage heritage varieties.

- **Packaging**

- a) Purchase in bins and bulk to reduce packaging, use paper bags over plastic when suitable.
- b) No waxed produce.

- **Fair trade**

- a) Purchase fair trade products if available.  
Visit [www.transfair.ca](http://www.transfair.ca) for more information on Fair trade products

For example, if we had to make a decision whether to put local broccoli at \$14.75 per case, imported broccoli at \$15.75 a case, or local organic broccoli at \$25 a case in our large Good Food Box, we could use our priority list to help us decide. We also know from experience that the local farmer who is selling broccoli at \$14.75 often sends us spoiled produce. Following the priorities, and assuming we had no other alternatives, we would choose quality over locally produced, and value over sustainable growing practices. In this particular scenario, local farmers would not benefit directly. Maintaining a program that offers customers value and quality will allow us to thrive and grow, and reach

### Did you know:

- About 11 percent of the world's surface is covered by arable land.
- Canadians use 2.5 times the amount of agricultural land per person than the world average, yet many Canadians go hungry.
- The FAO believes that, even in face of urbanization, there are sufficient under-utilized lands to meet our food production requirements.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 1997

all of our goals. If the food box had poor quality food or was too expensive the program might fail which doesn't help anybody.

## Box Contents and Produce Mix

Strive for a mixture of heavy staples, leafy greens and a variety of fruits. The weight of the box can be an important indicator of value to people, but at the same time you need a variety of tastes, textures and colours to make the box interesting and nutritious. Reaching a balance between cultural, local, and price preferences is difficult. A good general principle is to remember that the food cannot appear too frivolous or challenging, for example, despite their nutritional value, radishes and parsley are perceived by many as garnishes, not food that fills you. Sometimes you may find that low-income customers may be concerned that you are wasting money if you include an item that they ordinarily consider too expensive to purchase. We discovered this from the many telephone calls we received when we included beautiful boxes of strawberries in a January Good Food Box. As it happened, we had gotten them for a good price, but we neglected to mention this in the newsletter. So if there's a special reason that you're putting in a particular item – because it's in season or “on sale” – it is worth explaining this to customers.

We try to put in one special item each time that is either normally a luxury (e.g. a mango or strawberries) or is slightly challenging (e.g. sprouts or rapini). Most customers love this element of surprise every time; it's like finding a little gift in their box. One of the frequent reservations we hear before people decide to buy the box is “will it include only low-value items like carrots, onions, and potatoes?” To reassure people about the variety and value of its contents, it helps to make sample lists available as part of the promotional material (always making clear that this is just a sample, and that the contents vary every time). Including an item that may be considered “exotic” by a number of your customers also requires that you educate your customers about the nutritional value and possible uses in the newsletter. More than one challenging item per box is probably too much, since they may decide that they don't like a food or can't prepare it.

### *Taking ethnic diversity into account*

You need to know the ethnic groups to which your customers and potential customers belong, and learn something about these groups' eating patterns. Aside from the fruits and vegetables that are specifically linked to one cultural group, each group may prefer a particular variety of a fruit or have different criteria for quality.

We have discovered that producing ethno-specific boxes is very labour intensive and they are difficult to promote without strong ties to the community in question.



In this area, our experience with the Caribbean Food Box compared to the Afri-Can Food Basket is illustrative. The Caribbean Box was introduced by FoodShare as a variation of the Good Food Box for \$20, but never sold very well, despite the high quality of produce. The Afri-Can Food Basket organizers approached FoodShare about starting their own box as a community development project for the African and Caribbean communities. They started a small office in the FoodShare warehouse, tagged onto the buying structure, but did all their own packing and promotion. Because of the organizers' ties and connection to their community, they were able to integrate the Afri-Can Food Basket more successfully into their community. Ultimately, however, the Afri-Can Food Basket organization began to shift its energies away from food boxes and toward community gardening and so that box is no longer available in Toronto.

### ***The importance of quality***

Not only must there be the appearance of quality in the box, according to variable notions of value but also actual quality. Buying the highest quality produce is not much more expensive than buying inferior quality seconds or discards, though the gap in customer appreciation between the two is huge. Obviously, food that is spoiled, spoiling, or about to spoil is a loss to the customer.

Contrary to popular opinion, produce is not very expensive, especially in Canada, one of the countries where people spend the lowest percentage of their income on food purchases. The staple Ontario crops, like carrots, onions, potatoes, apples, etc., are available almost all year round, and their cost is fairly stable (i.e. a two-pound bag of carrots costs approximately \$0.66 at any time of the year). Big fluctuations in cost occur with imported items, depending on other countries' growing conditions and local seasons, so it pays to learn about agricultural conditions and seasonal variations in other countries in order to know roughly what you should be paying for items at various times.

Having someone involved in your program – a buyer, staff person, wholesaler or experienced volunteer – who knows about the agricultural system, food prices and food storage and handling, is vital to ensuring that you put out a quality product.

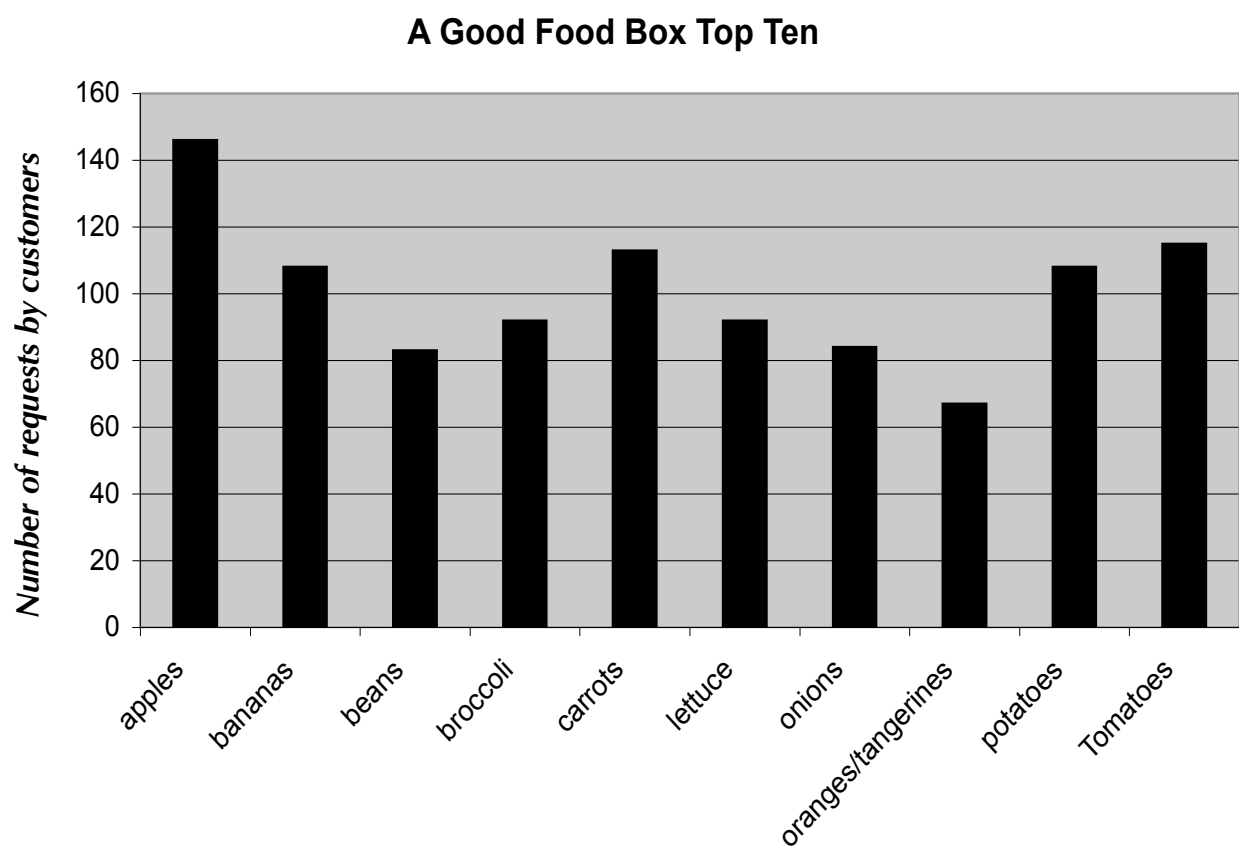
When we do receive complaints about damaged or spoiled items, our practice is to offer a credit that can be used towards the customer's next box. From our point of view, this is more feasible than driving around the city replacing items. However, we do have to remember that a low-income person may need that food right away and we try to respond accordingly.



***In every Good Food Box we try to meet the following criteria:***

- a) Staple foods (e.g. potatoes, carrots, onions, apples)
- b) Something new or different to push the food experience
- c) Luxury items (that people would not buy themselves)
- d) Salad items
- e) Combination of vegetables that work well together in many recipes
- f) A selection of fruits (three varieties)
- g) Packed in clean, re-usable boxes and lids
- h) Beautiful appearance
- i) Newsletters with recipes featuring a local vegetable or fruit
- j) Content sheet with local produce marked with an asterisk, also noting different varieties

***Below is a chart that shows the types of produce most desired by customers of the FoodShare Toronto Good Food Box.***



## Ordering Spreadsheets and Technique

FoodShare's Good Food Box team uses several Microsoft Excel spreadsheet sheets to calculate the number of cases of produce that need to be ordered for packing day.

You will find a copy of one of our spreadsheets in the appendix for reference.

## Presentation of Boxes

Box contents should be presented with the customers in mind. Creating a box that is aesthetically appealing and reduces spoilage or product damage is our goal. Creating an attractive box starts at the ordering stage. A mix that is very colourful will naturally look more exciting and is often perceived to have value and be fresh. Putting labels facing upward also gives the impression that the box was packed with care. If you are using cardboard boxes to hold the produce, pay special attention to the cleanliness of the boxes, the labels on the boxes themselves, and their capacity to carry weight. We use a three layer approach to putting fruits and vegetables in the box.

### ***Layer one:***

Root vegetables, cabbage, squash, melons, celery, apples and pears. Place bags flat on the bottom with the label pointing upwards.

### ***Layer two:***

Tomatoes, cucumber, zucchini, peppers, mushrooms, broccoli, beans, bananas, and grapes. Place any smaller items in a bag to prevent them from rolling to the bottom and getting damaged when they are moved around on delivery.

### ***Layer three:***

Lettuce, spinach, berries, and any other greens. The lid of the box should be put on immediately after the last items are inserted. This will reduce the green leaves' exposure to air, which will dry them out and cause them to wilt. A good fitting lid will help preserve these items. Berries such as strawberries must be covered so they do not roll out of their box and get damaged.

# Sample box contents

August 28th – August 31st, 2007

\* Ontario produce

## ***LARGE Good Food Box Contents***

6 Corn\*  
1 Bunch Carrots\*  
4 lbs. Potatoes\*  
1 Bag Bartlett Pears\*  
1 Bag Apples\*  
1 Cantaloupe  
1 Pint Mushrooms\*  
1 lb. Plum Tomatoes\*  
1 English Cucumber\*  
2 lbs. Onion\*  
1 Bunch Broccoli\*  
1 Romaine Lettuce\*  
1 Bunch Bananas

## ***LARGE Organic Box Contents***

6 Corn\*  
1 Bunch Kale\*  
1 Bunch Leek\*  
1 Spring Mix\*  
3 Hot House Tomatoes  
1 Sugar Melon\*  
3 lbs. Apples\*  
5 Peaches  
2 ½ lbs. White Potatoes\*

## ***WELLNESS BOX Contents***

2 Corn\*  
1 Bag Broccoli\*  
4 Bananas  
1 Bag Celery\*  
1 Bag Spring Mix  
4 Peaches\*  
1 Red Onion\*  
4 Potatoes\*  
1 Pint Cherry Tomatoes  
1 Bag Carrots\*



- 1 Pint Mushrooms\*
- ½ Cantaloupe
- 4 Oranges

***SMALL Good Food Box Contents***

- 4 Corn\*
- 1 Bunch Carrots\*
- ½ Basket Peaches\*
- ½ Basket Tomatoes\*
- 1 English Cucumber\*
- 2 lbs. Onion\*
- 1 Bunch Broccoli\*
- 1 Romaine Lettuce\*
- 1 Bunch Bananas

***SMALL Organic Box Contents***

- 4 Corn\*
- 1 Bunch Kale\*
- 1 Bunch Leek\*
- 1 Spring Mix\*
- 2 Hot House Tomatoes
- 1 Sugar Melon\*
- 1 ½ lbs. Apples\*
- 3 Peaches

***FRUIT Box Contents***

- 1 Bag Apples\*
- 1 Bunch Banana
- 1 Bag Pears\*
- 1 Cantaloupe
- 1 Basket Peaches\*

## **Produce Management Basics**

There is a science to properly storing and keeping produce fresh for the maximum amount of time. Most of the produce you will purchase will be stored for only several days and therefore will not need the kind of attention and environmental control that many produce distributors must use. It is still important to understand the basics behind proper storage of produce so you can maximize freshness by storing produce



in as close to ideal conditions as possible. Here are some guidelines to help ensure you are delivering high quality produce.

1. Deliveries of produce to the warehouse should be as close as possible to the packing date of the Good Food Boxes. Our produce is delivered one day prior to packing.
2. Check the quality of produce before you purchase the product (e.g. at an auction or Food Terminal) or check the quality of produce before you sign for the delivery. Also make sure that your volunteers or staff who are packing the box check the quality before putting the items into the box. Often the place where the produce is cut from the growing plant will give you a good idea of its freshness.
3. Put all items into the refrigerator immediately, except for potatoes, onions, garlic, and bananas. Put potatoes, garlic and onions in a cool dark and dry space (keep onions and garlic separate from potatoes). If you do not have a cool, dark and dry space, put the potatoes, onions and garlic into the refrigerator. Bananas will discolor in the refrigerator if stored for more than a few days. Be warned that bananas ripen very quickly when they are warm and close together. Separate boxes of bananas to prevent them from ripening too quickly. See the guidelines in the appendix for more details on proper produce storage.
4. Use the list of produce shelf life in the appendix as a guide of when it is appropriate to use older produce from an earlier packing day.
5. Keep all greens covered at all times, especially outside of the refrigerator. The air will pull the moisture from the leaves causing them to wilt and look terrible.
6. If you run short of a certain produce item for your boxes, substitute with left over items that will not last until the next packing day.
7. Find a use for the left over produce that will not last until the next packing day. Sell, donate or offer these items to your volunteers or to a local food bank.
8. Compost the items that are spoiled and return these nutrients back into the food system via community gardens and farmer's fields.

## **Organic Good Food Boxes**

Organic production is a system that integrates “cultural, biological, and mechanical practices that foster cycling of resources, promote ecological balance, and conserve biodiversity.” (Source: USDA, National Organic Program.)



The majority of Good Food Boxes sold each month contain conventional produce that we purchase directly from farms and the Ontario Food Terminal. However, we also distribute the organic Good Food Box in small (\$22) and large (\$32) sizes. In an average month we sell 3,000 to 4,000 Good Food Boxes, about 750 of these are organic or 20 percent of the total. The primary goal of the Good Food Box is to ensure access to good, healthy produce with a focus on creating a box that low-income communities can afford.

Our experience is that some of our consumers find organic attractive because they want to know where and how their food is produced, and believe that organic food is healthier for themselves and the environment. We agree that with the intensity of the environmental crises facing the planet, reducing pesticide use, decreasing fertile soil loss, decreasing transportation of food and decreasing packaging are all important goals.

FoodShare supports the distribution of organic food because we believe that there are long-term health problems associated with the overuse of pesticides and herbicides. The problem with organic food is that it is still prohibitively expensive for the margin we need to work in for the Good Food Box.

In the past decade, there has been tremendous growth in interest in organic food, and corresponding growth in the organic food industry. While “organic” was recently considered a fringe interest, it is now a household term. However, organic products remain more expensive and are just as likely to be imported as conventional produce.

The reason that organic is generally more expensive is because of the more labor-intensive nature of chemical-free methods of production and the still comparatively small scale of the organic market. This means that higher prices are the only way to make organic agriculture viable. Many people believe that as the market grows and the organic food system becomes more efficient, prices will decrease and become more accessible to low-income people.

In short, we have learned to be practical. We know that we can't change the agricultural and distribution system, support low-income farmers and low-income consumers all at the same time. From what we have learned from our own experience, we would say that some, or all, of the following factors may help groups to obtain organic produce inexpensively enough to be accessible for low-income consumers:

- Build a relationship with an organic farmer (or farmers) who believes in the concept of alternative distribution enough (and can afford) to support you by giving you lower prices.

*Many organic practices simply make sense, regardless of what overall agricultural system is used.*

*Far from being a quaint throwback to an earlier time, organic agriculture is proving to be a serious contender in modern farming and a more environmentally sustainable system over the long term.*

David Suzuki

- Make the commitment to a farmer to buy a predetermined amount of their crops in an upcoming season, thereby lowering the risk for the farmer and increasing their incentive to offer you a lower price.
- A geographical situation that puts you close to your sources, and/or an ability to pick up produce, thereby eliminating costly and difficult deliveries to far-off places.
- An order that is large enough to get you a price-break (assuming there is enough supply available).

Whenever organic produce can be purchased cheaply enough or when we have an excess of a certain organic item, we will put these items into the conventional box. This way, customers who cannot afford the organic Good Food Box can at least get a sample of some of its items.

