Best Practices for Winter / Holiday Farmers Markets

To help Oregon farmers markets starting (or considering starting) new winter / holiday farmers markets as extensions of their existing markets, OFMA asked those who have operated these off-season markets to share their collective wisdom for their peers. Markets were polled in late October 2019, via listservs with OFMA, the PDX Market Managers Group, and the Farmers Market Coalition, and were asked to respond to the following questions:

- Why did you decide to start offering a winter / holiday market?
- How did you 'ease in?' Did you slowly extend your regular season? Or did you pick a regular day each month in the "off season" to hold it? Or did you do single-occurrence events organized around the holidays?
- What factors does one take into consideration when selecting a location that were NOT so much of a factor when selecting your regular season location?
- What steps did you take to prevent the slippery slope between farmers market and craft fair?
- How long did it take to "catch on?"
- What factors make it worth the extra organizing effort?
- Did anything really take you by surprise?
- Any resources that really helped you when you were starting out?

Jackie Hammond-Williams, Market Manager
Oregon City Farmers Market

How did you 'ease in?' Did you slowly extend your regular season?
Yes we did a Thanksgiving and Christmas Market one year first (2009)

What factors does one take into consideration when selecting a location that were NOT so much of a factor when selecting your regular season location?
We held the winter(outside too) in a different location (one of the factors for this was we thought it was more sheltered) and after 5 years realized we were confusing customers and new people moving into the city. We grew fast with both vendors and customers once we held it year-round in the same
location. But consideration needs to be given to wind direction in winter. I flip-flop the market map so music, dining has it's back to the weather direction. We tighten up space in both seasons 10X10' exactly), which is effective during winter months as vendors squished together support each other in wind events. We allow propane heaters AND vendors can park directly behind their booth space (winter only) for added tie-down capacity and storing extra clothes, products out of the rain. WE also have music as winter months can be quieter and that energy is needed. If it's absolutely deluging we cancel music.

**What steps did you take to prevent the slippery slope between farmers market and craft fair?**
Preference is given to (in this order) farmer, artisan food vendors, cideries, distilleries, wineries and summer vendors...only then do I let in a few crafters. I leave space during late winter for early plant nurseries too.

**How long did it take to "catch on?"**
Pretty quick!! We have never shrunk in size, only grown each winter.

**What factors make it worth the extra organizing effort?**
Hmm....supporting the farmers and vendors!? Keeping the 'market' fresh in customers minds, developing customer habits of shopping locally and supporting local farms year-round......plus spreading the word that shopping (and eating) seasonally is a good thing and oh my goodness what a LOT we have to offer during the winter months! I think running year-round makes the market stronger generally.

**Did anything really take you by surprise?**
How much customers would be loyal to and love the winter market, yes customers drop off but those that do come are REAL food shoppers not just there for a bunch of flowers.

**Any resources that really helped you when you were starting out?**
Just going to other winter markets and common sense:) Social media and banners on lampposts around the city help get the word out. It does take a lot of energy by market staff to get the word out initially as people do not expect markets to run in the winter, but with more running year round that will help change expectations. Although...too many in close proximity may kill business. We attract people from all over the south metro area as so many markets in this area close in the winter. If more were to run during the winter I think our customer and vendor base would shrink a bit.

Running every other weekend gives farmers, vendors, staff volunteers a break and a rest, would not recommend running every week...at least for several years. Another good point was that once we ran the market year-round I was able to leave my other 30 hr a week job and concentrate solely on running the market, from the increase in vendor revenue.

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**Ginger Rapport, Market Master**
**Beaverton Farmers Market**

The BFM Fall Season is Oct. thru Nov 23 (the Saturday before Thanksgiving), 9:00 – 1:30. We close for December and January, then open for the Winter season Feb., March, and April, 10:00 – 1:30. Summer is May thought September, 8:00 – 1:30.
The decision to extend our season came mostly as a response to vendors who wanted more year round income. Many of them were meeting customers in various places in the off season to provide them with product, one even sat in her car in our parking lot so customers could come to her for product.

When we first toyed with the idea of extending our season, we started by doing a single Harvest Market event right before Thanksgiving that was outside of our normal season which ended in October. Eventually we decided to stay open all the way through until the Saturday before Thanksgiving. When we experimented with the Winter Market we started with twice a month, which is different from every other week so it got confusing for people. In a nutshell, after trying a few different schedules, we found that it was easier on customers if we just stayed open every week so they didn’t have to try to remember when we were open and when we weren’t.

If a market is going to do a single event outside of their regular schedule, such as a holiday or harvest market, they will need to use all of their resources (ads, newsletters, website, social media) to remind customers to come back for that special event. We found that it was easier on customers to be open continuously rather than to try running special events outside of our normal schedule.

Winter Market Tip for outdoor locations:
All of our markets are held in the same location which means that they are all outdoors, no matter the weather. This can be a real challenge in those shoulder seasons, Fall and Winter, because the weather can be really stormy. In the Winter the market is small enough (30 - 40 vendors to start in Feb.) that we can “Circle the Wagons” if it looks like it is going to be especially wet and windy. What this means is that we line up the vendors, shoulder to shoulder, minimizing any space between them. We also allow them to park their cars in their spaces. Vendors tie down to one another and to their vehicles. They are able to keep backstock in their cars which helps them keep their product dry. It also makes loading and unloading easier which helps to keep vendor morale high on a day where sales are likely to be slow. Finally we bring in the big trucks to surround the group to provide a windbreak.

Ultimately it is the customers that decide whether or not special markets or extended seasons are a good idea. If they don’t want to be outside in the wet, or can’t remember your schedule they won’t come. Simple as that.

Hannah Ladwig, Market Manager
Communication & Outreach Coordinator
Gorge Grown Food Network

How did you ‘ease in?’ Did you slowly extend your regular season?
We wanted to provide a space for our local farmers and producers to sell their goods year round. We also wanted to provide a space for customers to continue to purchase items directly from the producers and keep our market shoppers engaged year round.

Our first season was once a month, January through April (our outdoor season is May - November). Our second indoor season was 1st and 3rd Saturdays December through April based on customer feedback.

What factors does one take into consideration when selecting a location?
Our first season we only had one option for location so we were basically had to make it work. One factor for markets to consider is parking/ parking lot maintenance (ie. snow removal)- ask questions like who would be responsible for removal/ would the market need to pay for plowing etc. Also in terms of inclement weather, who makes the call to cancel the market - the host/ location or the market organizers? Will the location host's staff be able to open the space in any weather conditions, etc. Most basically, how can the market and the location work together to make this call if there is inclement winter weather?

**What steps did you take to prevent the slippery slope between farmers market and craft fair?**

We set a 2:1 ratio of food vendors to craft makers. We’re limited by the indoor space so we give food vendors priority always and fill in the remaining spaces with crafters.

**How long did it take to "catch on?"

We’re still working on that! But once we started holding december markets (right after our outdoor season ended) we kept regular market shoppers engaged.

**What factors make it worth the extra organizing effort?**

Since starting the indoor market, our outdoor shoulder seasons have been more successful too! We don’t have to keep reminding folks about market season- because it’s year round now!

**Did anything really take you by surprise?**

In a small town like Hood River, people love the indoor market to shop but also as a social outing when things can get kind of dreary.

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**Kelly Greer, Market Manager**  
**Newport Farmers Market**

The Newport Farmers Market has been a year around market for years. May - Oct outdoors, Nov-April indoors. Some of our vendors are year around, some outdoor only, some indoor only. We have a few farmers who are year-round which makes it successful. We also have a few hot food vendors that are year-round so customers can get a hot meal. Which requires a certified kitchen. Last year we averaged 38 vendors per week indoors. We are on the coast so we have tourists year around which helps. Contact me if you have any questions!

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**Rebecca Landis, Market Manager**  
**Corvallis-Albany Farmers’ Markets**

We are offering a Holiday Farmers’ Market in Albany on Dec. 14. Note the name of the event sends a signal that it is explicitly about farmers.

I have zero interest in creating another craft bazaar at the exact moment that every community is overrun with same.

The decision to try this market stemmed from a vendor meeting held in August as part of our participation in OFMA’s Beginning Vendor Support Network.
The holiday market is not solely a beginning vendor thing. We expect to limit participation to vendors from our Albany market and not invite everyone in our Corvallis-Albany membership. We will have music, a squash cooking demo and kids’ activities.

Back in the 20th century — the last time I attempted one — it was hella expensive to drive customers to a different time and location. Lots of radio $ out the door and so-so attendance/sales.

Because there is now social media, we were able to look at locations that would bring in people we don’t already have as customers. We found an indoor space at a YMCA that is not close to our downtown location. This is based on an existing PoP partnership and the desire to strengthen it and reach more YMCA families.

Things that are different in this century that work in favor of holiday and winter markets: 1) more meat and poultry vendors and 2) more vendors able to preserve fruits and vegetables in jars or by drying.

Maybe this Albany experiment is the gateway drug in some vendor minds, but we are not at this point contemplating a winter market in Albany. We do publicize a weekly winterbuying meet-up at a local business that is connected to one of our bakeries. A produce vendor sends someone to sell directly, and other producers are represented.

Corvallis has a separately organized indoor winter market that is long-established. CIWM has guidelines that prescribe a balance between food and craft. Restaurant, baked goods and other non-grown things do count on the food side, but the rules have prevented the market from lapsing into a craft fair.

My observation is that CIWM became plausibly viable when our large OG produce vendors had enough season extension capacity to sign on. And it became more stable and reliable when they went from every other week to every week. I know there are valid reasons for every other in Portland, but it wasn’t working as well here.

Belle Rita Novak, Market Manager
Farmers’ Market at Forest Park, Springfield, MA

Our outside market is finishing up its 22nd year; our winter market is 10 years old. It just seemed to be a natural progression, partially since some vendors had leftover goods from the outside market, and some vendors were putting up hoop houses to grow things like greens for the winter season. Also, we have bakers, dairy farmers, a honey vendor, etc.

We didn’t ease in. We announced that we were going to have a winter market (there are a few in the region). We chose a different day, a different location although still within the public park where the outside market is held, and different hours, 10-2 rather than 12:30-6. We did that because some people can’t make it to the market on Tuesday. And, even though we have a good sized Jewish population in the area, and some won’t come to a Saturday market, they are a minority, and not a whole lot of our Orthodox population come to the Tuesday market anyhow.

Parking is always a consideration around here. Although Springfield is a city, we are in Western Mass, and lots of people drive, and public transportation isn’t that good.
As far as the slippery slope re: crafters, we limit the number of crafters that can come to both of our markets to no more than 2 a week.

I don’t remember how long it took to catch on since it’s already several years old.

I write a newsletter, and we have a website and a Facebook page, and the information is all over all of them. This market is a natural progression from our outside market. Not as many people show up, but the vendors don’t complain.

Good luck. It’s all good.

Cindy Walcott
Champlain Islands Farmers' Market, Vermont

We have a winter market, but we hold only four. Two in Nov and two in Dec. We used to have a once a month market in our entire off season, but that really did not work because the schedule was too spread out. We have a little break between our last outdoor market (Columbus Day weekend) and the first winter market (this year Nov 9). We hold it on Saturdays, inside a church basement, and can only accommodate 14 vendors (regular season we have about 32).

Our market requires at least 50% of our vendors be ag vendors, pretty broadly defined. We welcome artisan vendors, and feel that they add to the richness of our offerings. They have to be juried by the board. We are in an area that sees a lot of tourists and summer people so the non-ag vendors so pretty well -- although not nearly as well as the ag vendors.

Anyhow, we try to create a warm and intimate environment. Lunch is available to purchase and we have tables set up. Again, we are rural, so people come out to see their friends and neighbors.

We have a web page and a Facebook page, and use Front Porch Forum to remind people to come. We enjoy our winter market, but when January comes, we are also grateful for a break for a few months!

Eileen Nichols
Webb City Farmers Market, Missouri

We began our winter market 10 years ago at the request of our meat vendors. For the first three years it was every other week, the first two years in our outdoor pavilion and after a particularly brutal winter we moved to the historical society’s building which could accommodate about 12 vendors. On nice days additional vendors would set up outside by the entrance. By the third year we went to a weekly market because folks seemed to have a hard time remembering which week the market was on.

Then the city received a grant to put vinyl sides on the pavilion and buy portable heaters during the winter and we returned to the pavilion which can host 40 to 50 vendors. Having the pavilion available was critical since our farmers and other vendors had outgrown the historical society’s building. The year before the market
embarked on organizing a winterproduction conference about every 18 months, bringing in national and regional presenters, and our farmers were increasing their winter production.

Six years ago we added a Christkindlmarket featuring local crafters and food artisans and holiday activities during November and December since our regular market vendors only used the north half of the pavilion.

The market is served by about 22 high tunnels and our farmers’ tables are loaded with produce year-round. January and February are quiet, but the rest of the year we’re usually bursting at the seams with vendors and customers.

Sherry Maher  
Brattleboro Winter Farmers' Market, Vermont

Our Winter Market started in 2006. We're a grassroots community sustainability group and one of our members saw how much produce vendors at the long-standing successful outdoor Market in Brattleboro Vermont still had at the end of October when their season ended.

I would say first start with your vendors and canvas their interest and capacity. If you already have a successful outdoor Season Market, then carrying that energy into an indoor season should help a new indoor market succeed.

As for location, an adequate sized space in a convenient location with ample parking for your customers as well as your vendors is key.

When we began, there wasn't a lot of extended season growing yet but it was definitely catching on, so we were heavier with crafts at the start but each year we had more farms and more produce available. We started weekly on Saturday during November and December, and after two successful November-December seasons we began to explore extending into January through March. First we did it with one market a month and we had events or themes to help promote and get people interested such as fiber, woodworking and we ended with a CSA Fair. Quickly our customers said they wanted more than just once a month, so we went to twice a month. But with that customers had trouble remembering which week the market was open. So after 2 years of that experiment we went to every Saturday from November through March and haven't looked back.

We're a bit unique in that the Winter Market in Brattleboro is organized by our sustainability nonprofit group, while the outdoor summer Market is a long-standing member organization. But many of the same vendors from the summer Market participate in our Winter Market and many of the customers don't realize that we are two different operations. In my mind it doesn't matter so much if the customers understand that organizational backstory, but that they know where to go when, to find their local farmers. And our 2 overlapping groups have a great working relationship.

It's also quite apparent that we primarily serve the local population so the farms and especially the fresh produce are the driver. Though we definitely attract out of town visitors, our market assessments have shown us that it's the locals who sustain us.

Under the what makes it worth it question, I would say the top two things are knowing that this "off-season" income stream is such an important boost to our farmers and producers, and thus to our local economy, and
that we have created a real community asset where people look forward weekly to accessing great food and connecting with friends during the long dark VT winters.

I'd be happy to share more of our experience with any of your folks looking to put their toe in the winter market world.

Dana Burnham
Wilmington Farmers Market, Massachusetts

Why did you decide to start offering a winter / holiday market?
We had requests from customers pretty much from the beginning of the market, 9 years ago. A few years ago, we added a farmer who has a lot of greenhouses, and he really wanted to go year round, as did our seafood vendor. We finally added a winter season last year.

How did you 'ease in?' Did you slowly extend your regular season?
We initially responded by extending our season to the end of October, but have since pulled back to mid-October. We're in New England, and the weather is just too unpredictable as we get to fall, and while it might be okay for customers to be outside for as long as it takes them to do their shopping, it was really tough for our vendors to be outside for 3 hours+ when it was really cold.

Since we're an all-volunteer organization, and all but one of the committee members has a full-time job, we decided to do one Sunday a month for the winter season. It's already a huge commitment to give up one weekend day a week from mid-June to mid-October, and honestly, no one was willing to do the same for the off-season, myself included. Also, the church we use is extremely community focused, with stuff going on constantly, so it's unlikely we could get every Sunday afternoon from mid-October through mid-June!

We're a Sunday market outdoors, so it seemed best to stick with Sunday. Last year we were mostly the 1st Sunday of the month, November through May (2 months where we had to go with 2nd Sunday). This year, we managed to get every 1st Sunday, since we got in touch with the church we use a lot early this year.

What factors does one take into consideration when selecting a location?
Other than it being indoors, we wanted the same as what we have now - free! and parking! We're a small market (anywhere from 8 to 15 vendors depending on the week), so we weren't looking for a huge space.

What steps did you take to prevent the slippery slope between farmers market and craft fair?
Much like everyone else responding, we limit the craft vendors to no more than two per market.

How long did it take to "catch on?"
Still an unknown for us, although it seems like people this year already know that once the regular season is over, we head indoors.

What factors make it worth the extra organizing effort?
Supporting our farmers primarily - same reason that makes it worth the effort to do it in the regular season.

Did anything really take you by surprise?
   The number of vendors who needed power, but didn't bring extension cords and just figured they could use whatever the church had.

Any resources that really helped you when you were starting out?
   Can't really think of anything, other than the church that hosts us was really welcoming and willing to give us a chance.

Good luck!