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## **Seattle Wholesale Growers Market forges partnerships with Northwest grocery chains**

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With “buy local” sentiments on the rise across all consumer categories, the Pacific Northwest is a region where farmers, ranchers and makers are contributing positively to the economy by telling their story at the cash register.

At the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market, that means delivering local and sustainably grown specialty cut flowers through multiple channels. Established in 2011, the mission of the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market is “to foster a vibrant community marketplace that sustains local flower farms and provides top-quality products and service to the floral industry of the Pacific Northwest.”



Denise Johnson, floral staff member at Seattle's Town & Country Markets, discusses the chain's sourcing of locally grown flowers at one of the Meet the Flower Farmer events held in June. As a producer-owned cooperative, the market has a current membership of 16 flower farms in Washington, Oregon and Alaska. A diverse group of customers, including studio designers, retail florists and mass-market grocers, has embraced the farmer-to-florist wholesale model, said board chair Diane Szukovathy of Jello Mold Farm, based in Mount Vernon, WA. "The market is a dynamic hub for the local floral community. Connecting our customers with the origins of their flowers is a measurable asset that has increased month-over-month, year-over-year," said Szukovathy.

In 2012, the fledgling market received a U.S. Department of Agriculture Multi-State Specialty Crop Block Grant. The \$138,000, three-year grant project, funded through the Washington State Department of Agriculture and Oregon Department of Agriculture, helped establish SWGM as a reliable source of sustainably grown flowers to regional supermarkets. Grant funds supported additional staffing, marketing, branding and packaging. The grant also paid for each farm to be assessed by Salmon-Safe, a Northwest sustainable agriculture certification program.

SWGM staff worked closely with select floral buyers at independent grocery chains in the region to develop a number of product lines, including mixed bouquets and growers' bunches promoting popular seasonal crops.

One objective of the grant was to track consumer purchasing choices for local and certified sustainable floral products. In 2014, SWGM partnered with Portland, OR-based New Seasons Market for a flower-giveaway event. Peterkort Roses, a SWGM member, provided Salmon-Safe certified roses as part of the promotion.

"Our goals were to find out if customers know about Salmon-Safe and if they look for that label when shopping for flowers," said Molly Sadowsky, SWGM manager. "Most customers were unfamiliar with Salmon-Safe; however once we explained what it is, many were interested and supportive."

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Last month, Seattle-based Town & Country Markets, a six-store independent grocery chain, hosted two similar Meet the Flower Farmer events. Beautiful blooms spilled from the displays with point-of-purchase signage reading: “Bringing Excited Farmers and Happy Customers Together.”

Floral category manager Melanie Cherry, a regular customer of SWGM, said the event “was a great opportunity for our customers and a fun experience for the farmers to see that their hard work is appreciated — and their flowers are loved.”

Putting a face on each farmer who grows fresh, safe, unique and local flowers is an added value for Town & Country Markets, Cherry said. “We believe in supporting local farmers. In the past, each of our stores was responsible for finding its own sources for local products. But now that we have a relationship with the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market, each store is assured a reliable source of local flowers with the same choices across our chain. We have a wide mix of customers. We see that they’re very interested in where flowers come from and they appreciate and acknowledge local farmers.”

*Debra Prinzing is the creator of [Slowflowers.com](http://Slowflowers.com) and a board member of the Seattle Wholesale Growers Market. She can be contacted at [dkprinzing@aol.com](mailto:dkprinzing@aol.com).*

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