

Leveraging USDA Grant Support to Bolster Farmers Market Growth



In 2015, The Land Connection launched a small mid-week farmers market in Champaign, IL. The location was chosen to connect the nearby neighborhoods that lacked access to grocery stores to the downtown business district, with the goal of making everyone in the community feel welcome at the market. During our first four seasons, the Champaign Farmers Market has benefited from three prominent USDA grant programs: the **Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP)**, the **Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Program (FINI)**, and the **Specialty Crop Block Grant**. By pulling together the support from these programs, our young market has been able to develop programs and resources that bring the community together around local food, helping consumers not just gain access to local produce, but also gain confidence in using it.

Farmers Market Promotion Program (FMPP)

In 2016 The Land Connection was awarded an FMPP Capacity Building grant to grow the Champaign Farmers Market via three primary avenues:



Diversified **advertising** for the market via print ads, radio, local digital magazines, and bus advertising.

Purchase of equipment and supplies for a market **sampling** tent at the market, offering regular cooking demonstrations, recipe ideas, and tastings of seasonal produce to boost sales.



Training for market farmers across Central Illinois through our **Mastering the Farmers Market** workshops. We offered workshops and webinars featuring regionally renowned farmers and experts on marketing, booth design, and financial tools for market farmers.

Visibility of the Champaign Farmers Market skyrocketed thanks to the increased advertising budget. All of the new advertisers offered matching ads, allowing us to amplify our purchasing power and reach even more residents than originally anticipated.

While we saw a modest increase in overall attendance after the first year of the grant (10%), the average increase in sales for vendors was **40%** after our first FMPP season.

Our sampling tent, recipes, and cooking demonstrations directly boosted sales each week for featured vendors and introduced our shoppers to items they may not have been willing to try on their own.

Our **Mastering the Farmers Market** series trained 43 farmers around Central and Southern Illinois, and our webinar has been viewed by 145 farmers and market managers.



Food Insecurity Nutrition Incentive Program (FINI)

SNAP incentives have been a priority at the Champaign Farmers Market from the start. In 2015 we built an incentive fund out of sponsorship donations to offer double SNAP benefits up to \$20/week. In 2016 and 2017 we received FINI funds via the Link Up Illinois program and introduced new strategic incentives:

- **Triple Link October:** for the final month of our 2016 season we added an additional match on top of our regular SNAP doubling. Shoppers could receive up to \$40 extra to spend on fresh produce
- **Triple Link Tuesday:** we expanded the Triple LINK strategy to a monthly occurrence throughout the 2017 season.

These two strategies led to significant growth in our SNAP sales across the first three market seasons.

In our third season we saw:



Total SNAP tokens dispensed

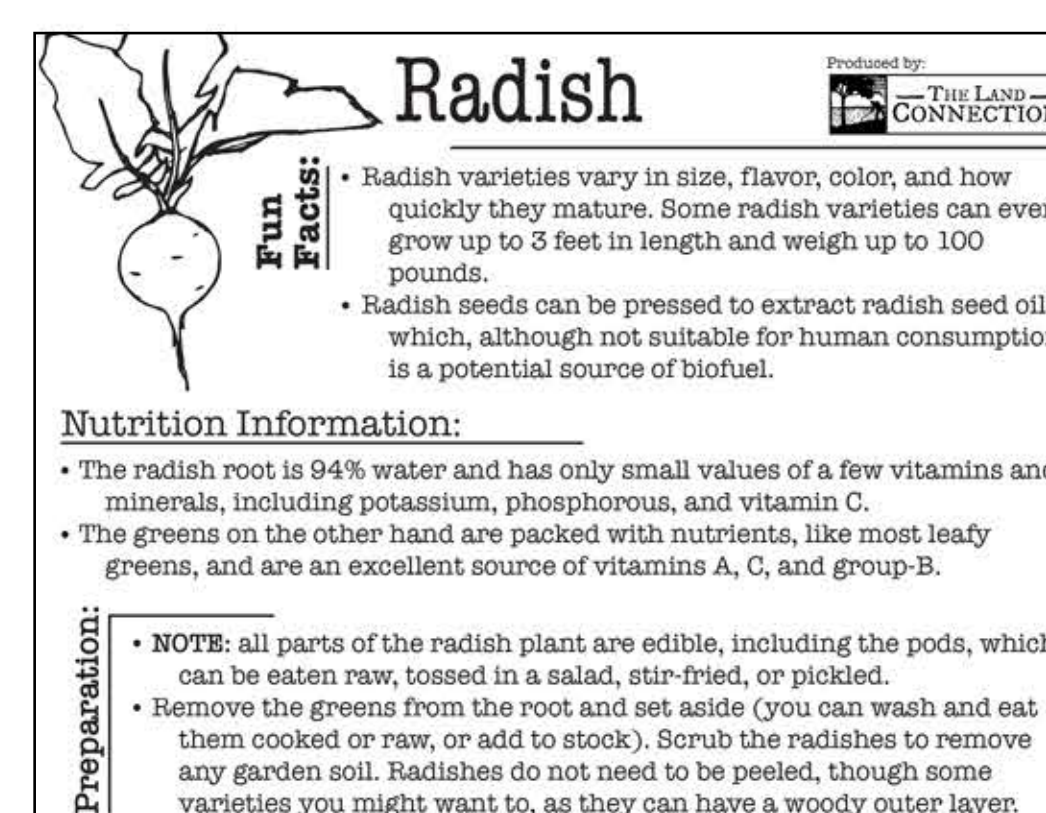


In 2018 we received our own FINI pilot project award to pair **Triple Link Tuesday** with a **Winter Bonus** incentive program, designed to help SNAP shoppers maintain healthy produce purchasing habits throughout the year. Partnering with our local food co-op, we're offering 50 regular market SNAP customers \$100 in vouchers for fresh fruits and vegetables during the off-season.

Specialty Crop Block Grant (ISC)

In 2013 The Land Connection received an Illinois Specialty Crop (ISC) grant to build a collection of recipe cards highlighting seasonal produce, our Farm Fresh Now! series. The series was expanded to include new recipes and nutrition information cards with a new ISC grant in 2016.

The 2016 series was shared as a weekly electronic newsletter with farmers market managers, farmers, and other interested parties around the country.



Building on feedback from previous seasons, we have developed a new series of informational cards with our 2018 ISC grant which focus on helping consumers understand how to use and store seasonal crops. Cards are distributed by farmers at their booths, as well as during cooking demonstrations to encourage purchasing by local shoppers.

We have paired the cards with a radio/podcast series on Sprecker that showcases local specialty crop growers, looking at the stories behind their farms, as well as local chefs discussing their experiences with seasonal crops.



Specialty Crop Card and Podcast Series reach (as of early September):

- over 1,800 cards distributed
- over 320 plays of podcast series
- over 120 downloads of podcast series

Tying the Grants Together

All these projects have been developed to accomplish two primary goals:

- **Boost sales** for local producers
- **Improve access** to local foods for the whole community



The combination of these USDA funded projects has allowed us to approach these objectives from different sides, with each project supporting the others:

- increased advertising funds through FMPP helped us reach more low-income residents; boosting our SNAP numbers at the market.
- the ISC cards highlighting both use and storage has helped us improve consumer confidence in purchasing; particularly for shoppers with restricted food budgets.
- the interviews through the Illinois Specialty Crop Podcast & Card Series have engaged consumers by helping them learn more about their local farmers.
- the strength of our SNAP incentive programs has been a draw for farmers, non-SNAP shoppers and community support, strengthening the market as a whole.