



# Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce

## FY 2006 Specialty Crop Block Grant Program

### Final Performance Report

### Agreement # 12-25-G-0518

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## **Introduction**

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The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC) was awarded \$103,626.70 in funding for the FY 2006 Specialty Crop Block Grant Program (SCBGP) in February 2007. MDAC implemented two projects to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops throughout the state: *Growing Farmers for Growing Markets* and *Mississippi Farmers Market Promotion*.

## **GROWING FARMERS FOR GROWING MARKETS**

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### **Outline of Issue**

The demand for fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables has increased in recent years across the nation and across the state of Mississippi as well. The increased demand can be attributed to several factors including consumers becoming more health conscience and the desire to buy 'local.' As a result, the number of farmers markets in Mississippi has increased. At the time of project submittal, MDAC had identified 23 farmers markets statewide. The number of identified markets more than doubled totaling 54 in 2009, and new markets are opening each year across the state.

Farmers markets allow growers to fulfill the strong consumer demand for fresh, locally grown produce by selling directly to the consumer, which benefits producers, consumers, and local economies. The strong demand for fresh fruits and vegetables and the growing number of markets created a need for additional producers growing for local markets and other direct retail outlets. The purpose of this project was to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops in Mississippi by increasing the number of producers growing for local farmers markets and other direct marketing outlets.

### **Project Approach**

The approach taken to increase the number of specialty crop producers growing crops for local farmers markets was to educate farmers on crop production practices and the benefits of selling specialty crops at farmers markets and other direct-to-consumer markets. The Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce partnered with the Mississippi Fruit and Vegetable Growers' Association and the Mississippi State University Extension Service to present a series of workshops to both new and existing growers. Participants were exposed to valuable information regarding the production of a wide range of fruit and vegetable crops. Farmers learned to diversify their crops, expand their growing season, and sell directly to

consumers to achieve the highest potential value for products. A total of eight workshops was held with a total attendance of 421.

Collected registration fees were reinvested into the project. The collected fees were utilized to pay for participant meals, travel for speakers, facility rental, and workshop supplies such as folders and name badges.

## Goals

The goals of this project were 1) to present a series of three workshops to at least 30 farmers to educate them on how to grow specialty crops to be sold at farmers markets and through other direct markets and 2) to present two follow-up workshops based on additional interests and needs of farmers participating in the original series of workshops.

MDAC surpassed these goals by presenting more workshops than originally proposed and by having a higher than expected attendance. The attendance at the series of three workshops surpassed the goal of 30 to total 79. Rather than hosting only two follow-up workshops, seven follow-up workshops were held.

## Results, Conclusions, and Lessons Learned

As a result of this project, eight workshops were held with a total attendance of 421. Farmers were exposed to a broad range of information from the production of fruits and vegetables to post-harvest handling and techniques for selling direct to the public through farmers markets. Farmers learned the benefits of and strategies for diversifying crops, expanding the growing season, and selling directly to consumers.

As the number of farmers markets across the state increased, it became apparent that market managers were in need of an educational opportunity on how to successfully operate farmers markets. Upon identifying the need, MDAC also presented a workshop designed for managers. The workshop was well attended and well received by the market managers. Fifteen farmers markets were represented at the workshop.



Farmers are given tips on how to set up a booth and display produce that is eye catching to customers.

A summary of the workshops is as follows:

Workshop	Date/Location	Attendance	Workshop Overview
Fruit and Vegetable Marketing and Production	February 10, February 24, March 10, 2007  Jackson, MS	79	This three-part series covered a wide variety of topics relating to fruit and vegetable production and marketing including crop scheduling and planting, pest management, selling at farmers markets, post harvest handling, organic production, and niche markets.
Cool Season Vegetable Production and Marketing	August 7, 2007  Jackson, MS	44	This workshop covered topics relating to cool season crops that can be grown in Mississippi including crop scheduling, crop management, and selling at farmers markets. Information about the Mississippi MarketMaker Program was also presented.
Selling at Farmers Markets	March 8, 2008  Jackson, MS	70	Don Wambles from the Alabama Farmers Market Authority presented this one-day workshop providing growers with tips for successfully selling at farmers markets including strategies for increasing sales, setting up displays, pricing, packaging, handling, and customer service.
Fruit and Vegetable Marketing and Production	March 15, 2008  Starkville, MS	30	This one day workshop covered a wide variety of topics relating to fruit and vegetable production and marketing including crop scheduling and planting, pest management, selling at farmers markets, and crop season extension through high tunnel production.
Vegetable Production Season Extension	October 14, 2008  Jackson, MS	29	This workshop taught vegetable growers how to extend their growing season through a variety of methods including crop scheduling, greenhouse production, and high tunnel production.
Vegetable Production Season Extension	October 21, 2008  Hattiesburg, MS	50	This workshop taught vegetable growers how to extend their growing season through a variety of methods including crop scheduling, greenhouse production, and high tunnel production.
Farmers Market Manager Workshop	February 18, 2009  Jackson, MS	21	This one-day workshop taught farmers market managers strategies for successfully operating a farmers market including vendor recruitment, management, attracting new customers, and finding funding streams for markets. Darlene Wolnik with the Crescent City Farmers Market and marketumbrella.com was the featured speaker.
Selling at Farmers Markets	May 7, 2009  Jackson, MS	98	Don Wambles from the Alabama Farmers Market Authority presented this one-day workshop providing growers with tips for successfully selling at farmers markets including strategies and provided farmers market managers with tips for successfully operating a market.
Total Number of Workshops: 8		Total Attendance: 421	

As a result of the workshops, farmers participating in the workshops are implementing some of the strategies and techniques that were presented to them. Farmers attending the workshops were surveyed in 2009 to determine if they were implementing the practices that were being taught at the workshops. Of the 167 surveys that were distributed, twenty-nine were returned for a response rate of 17 percent. Some of the results of the survey are as follows:

Because of the knowledge gained from the workshops I have:	Yes	No	No, but plan to in the future
Increased the variety of crops grown.	48%	17%	35%
Selected varieties that mature over a longer harvest period.	55%	17%	28%
Developed a planting schedule to harvest year round.	35%	17%	48%
Planted cool season crops.	59%	24%	17%
Sold to local markets.	59%	20.5%	20.5%
Sold to farmers markets.	69%	14%	17%
Developed value-added products from crops grown.	21%	41%	38%
Constructed a high tunnel.	45%	27.5%	27.5%
Engaged in season extension activity or constructed structure to extend the harvest season.	52%	24%	24%

### Progress towards Achieving Outcome Measures

By holding these workshops, the number of farmers participating in farmers markets has increased along with the volume and variety of produce sold at markets. Farmers market managers were surveyed annually in 2007, 2008, and 2009 to track progress. On each survey, managers were asked to compare the number of farmers participating in their market along with the variety and volume of produce sold at the market for that particular year with that of the previous year. Since some of the markets reporting had been in operation for one year, progress was measured using data from the markets that had operated for the two years pertaining to the survey. The increase of farmers, volume, and variety was calculated on an average per market basis.



A workshop presenter shares information about herb production and marketing with growers.

Measurable Outcome #1

The first outcome of the project is an increased number of farmers participating at farmers markets. It was estimated that the educational sessions would increase participation of growers in farmers markets by 10 percent in 2007, 12 percent in 2008, and 15 percent in 2009. The number of farmers selling at markets increased each year, and the expected outcomes were achieved each year with exception of 2009. This may be due to the growing number of farmers markets. As the number of markets increased, existing farmers selling at the markets became more dispersed among the markets.

Years	Expected Outcome	Actual Outcome
2006 to 2007	10% increase in growers participating in farmers markets.	The number of farmers selling at markets increased by an average of 23% per market.
2007 to 2008	12% increase in growers participating in farmers markets.	The number of farmers selling at markets increased by an average of 31% per market.
2008 to 2009	15% increase in growers participating in farmers markets.	The number of farmers selling at markets increased by an average of 7% per market.

Measurable Outcome #2

The project also resulted in an increase in the volume and variety of produce sold at markets. It was expected that the project would result in a 20 percent increase in product volume and variety available at markets from 2006 to 2009. Due to the increased number of markets that began operating between 2006 and 2009 and since not all markets reported data, the data captured through surveys is reported for each particular year on an average per market basis. Both the variety and volume of produce sold at markets increased each year.

Years	Expected Outcome	Actual Outcome	
		Variety of Produce Sold	Volume of Produce Sold
2006 to 2007	The volume and variety of produce available at farmers markets will increase by 20% from 2006 to 2009.	The variety of produce sold at markets increased by an average of 18% per market.	The volume of produce sold at markets increased by an average of 17% per market.
2007 to 2008		The variety of produce sold at markets increased by an average of 21% per market.	The volume of produce sold at markets increased by an average of 65% per market.
2008 to 2009		The variety of produce sold at markets increased by an average of 14% per market.	The volume of produce sold at markets increased by an average of 12% per market.

It is important to note that of the markets completing the survey, the number of markets reporting an increase of volume of produce sold was 80 percent in 2007, 92 percent in 2008, and 44 percent in 2009. The increase of variety and volume from 2008 to 2009 may not have been as much of an increase as in previous years due to weather conditions throughout the year.

Overall, this project was successful and positively impacted Mississippi's specialty crop producers and Mississippi's farmers markets.

## **Additional Information**

### **A Sampling of Pictures from Workshops**



**A local grower shares information with farmers about his experiences with organic crop production.**



**High grower participation shows that growers are interested in the topics presented during the workshops.**



**A display is set up at the Selling at Farmers Market workshop demonstrating how to make produce and booths look appealing to shoppers.**



**A local grower shares information with farmers about selling his products to local restaurants.**

## MISSISSIPPI FARMERS MARKET PROMOTION

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### Outline of Issue

The Mississippi Farmers Market (MFM) is a producer-only market located in Downtown Jackson, Mississippi. The market initially opened temporarily under an open-air tent in May 2005 until the completion of its new permanent facility in February 2006. Initially, both farmer participation and consumer traffic fluctuated from stagnant to moderate. There were still many consumers in the area that were not familiar with the new farmers market or the benefits of shopping at a true, producer-only market. In addition, many consumers are not aware of the types of fruits and vegetables that are grown in the state, the nutritional value of the produce, and the various ways to prepare the produce.

The purpose of the project was to enhance the competitiveness of specialty crops by promoting Mississippi's specialty crops through the Mississippi Farmers Market. Funding was requested to promote the market and the specialty crops sold there.

### Project Approach

Several approaches were taken to promote Mississippi's specialty crops through the Mississippi Farmers Market.

- Themed events were held at the MFM to highlight specific crops. These events promoted Mississippi specialty crops and educated consumers on the variety of produce grown in the area, nutritional value of produce, and various preparation techniques.
- The MFM and the events held at the MFM were promoted through various media including radio, print, and television.
- A statewide farmers market radio campaign was broadcast during June 2007 on a statewide radio network encouraging consumers to shop at their local farmers market. The radio ad referenced the website created by MDAC where consumers could find a list of Mississippi's farmers markets. This benefited all of the farmers markets throughout the state.
- The MFM also sponsored a fifteen minute radio segment of the Thursday edition of the *GardenMama* show from March to November 2007. This show was broadcast several times a week on a statewide radio network.
- Banners were also made to promote the market. The banners were hung in high-traffic areas in Jackson where they would easily be seen by the public.

## Goals

The goals of this project were 1) to promote Mississippi specialty crops by holding 20 events during the calendar year 2007 at the MFM and 2) to increase the number of farmers selling at the MFM by 20 percent.

These goals were achieved. In 2007, the MFM hosted 23 events that drew customers to the market and promoted specialty crops and the MFM. The MFM hosted nine events in 2008 and six events in 2009. The average number of farmers selling at the farmers market during the peak of the produce season (June-September) increased by 86 percent from 2006 to 2007.

## Results, Conclusions, and Lessons Learned

Holding the 38 themed events at the MFM proved to be an effective approach for increasing the number of shoppers at the market. These events exposed shoppers to the types of produce grown in Mississippi and educated them on the seasonality of produce. Although the name of not all of these events strictly promoted specialty crops (i.e. Annual Blood Drive), eligible specialty crops did benefit from each of the events. These events drew new shoppers to the market that purchased produce from the farmers. Recipes incorporating seasonal fruits and vegetables were available for shoppers to encourage them to purchase more produce. Farmers were encouraged to have samples of fresh produce available for shoppers to taste. On twenty-three occasions, chefs from the local area demonstrated how to prepare unique dishes using in-season Mississippi fruits and vegetables. More events were held in 2007 with fewer events being held in the years to follow. It was discovered that fewer events were needed each year to draw crowds to the market because customers were getting accustomed to shopping at the market on a regular basis.



**A local chef prepares a nutritious dish using fresh produce for the MFM.**

Radio proved to be a good advertising method for the MFM. The radio advertising served two purposes: 1) to promote fresh, locally grown fruits and vegetables and 2) to promote the MFM. The radio spots advertising the MFM and the events held at the market were aired on six radio stations mainly during the peak growing season when the greatest volume and variety of fruits and vegetables were available and when event days were held to ensure a proper balance of shoppers and available produce. One of the six radio stations is a statewide radio network with eight affiliate stations which reaches a listening audience across the state.

Sponsoring a weekly fifteen minute segment on the *GardenMama* radio show was a unique opportunity to promote specialty crops by educating consumers on produce availability in the state. This show was broadcast several times a week on a statewide radio network. During this live

broadcast the host, GardenMama, answers questions from callers about a variety of topics including gardening, horticulture, and floriculture. Members of MFM and MDAC staff were featured guests of the GardenMama each week and often included other special guests such as specialty crop farmers, industry experts, and local extension agents. Through the radio show, consumers were also made aware of the benefits of purchasing locally grown produce and of locations of farmers markets across the state where they could purchase fresh produce. Not only was the radio program effective for promoting the market to consumers, it was also an effective tool for promoting the market to fruit and vegetable growers across the state. The MFM manager had telephone calls from growers that heard about the market on the GardenMama radio show and inquired about selling at the market. To promote specialty crops across the state, a statewide radio campaign was implemented encouraging consumers to shop at their local farmers market. The radio spot referenced the website created by MDAC where consumers could find a list of all markets in the state, so they could easily locate their nearest market. This benefited all farmers markets across the state along with the MFM.

Mississippi Farmers Market Calendar of Events 2007 - 2009	
<b>2007 Events</b>	<b>2008 Events</b>
March 24 Ag Day at the Market	June 7 Cooking Demonstrations with Chef James Roache'
March 31 Easter Egg Hunt at the Market	June 14 Next Great Mississippi Homegrown Recipe Contest
April 28 Fruit and Veggies More Matters Campaign Kick-off	June 21 Next Great Mississippi Homegrown Recipe Contest Dish Sample
May 12 Egg-Cellent Market Day	July 5 Independence Day Celebration
May 26 Pickling and Cucumber Day	July 19 Cooking Demonstrations with Chef James Roache'
June 2 First Anniversary Celebration	August 9 Farmer Appreciation Day
June 9 Sweet Corn Day	August 28 Annual MFM Blood Drive
June 16 Blueberry Day	Oct 4 Cooking Demonstrations with Chef James Roache'
June 23 Tomato Day	Oct 25 Fall Harvest Fest
June 30 Melon Madness	
July 7 Pepper Day	<b>2009 Events</b>
July 14 Dairy Day	May 30 Celebrate Field Tomatoes
July 21 Taste of the South	June 6 Celebrate Blueberries
July 28 Salad Days of Summer	June 13 MFM Annual Summer Kick-off
August 4 Kids' Day	July 11 Watermelon Day
August 11 Muscadine Day	Sept 12 Farmer Appreciation Day
Sept 8 Blue Bell Ice Cream 100 <sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration	Oct 24 Fall Harvest Fest
Sept 13 Annual Health Fair and Blood Drive	
Sept 29 Sweet Potato Day	
Oct 27 Mississippi Old Garden Rose Society – Antique Rose Sale	
Nov 3 Mississippi Old Garden Rose Society – Antique Rose Sale	
Nov 17 Food for Thought	
Nov 24 Mississippi Christmas Tree Promotion	

A lesson learned throughout the project is the reason that customers shop at the MFM is to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables from the farmers. The MFM is a producer-only farmers market in that it allows only Mississippi growers to sell fruits and vegetables and restricts produce resellers and wholesalers from participating. In order to create a variety in the market, the market does allow producers of value-added products to sell their goods at the market. The number of farmers selling at the market during the peak produce season is greater than the number of value-added producers. The number of shoppers coming to the MFM was consistently much higher during the peak season for fresh produce (June - September) than any other time of the year. By allowing value-added goods to be sold in the market, the MFM retains a loyal customer base year-around even in times of less produce availability.

## **Progress towards Achieving Outcome Measures**

By holding the themed events which promoted specialty crops and by promoting the Mississippi Farmers Market, the number of customers shopping at the markets and the number of farmers selling at the market increased. Beginning in June 2007, the MFM Manager began keeping track of the number of farmers selling at the market as well as the number of shoppers in order to track progress being made.

### Measurable Outcome #1

As consumers became more knowledgeable of produce and further aware of the benefits of buying fresh, locally grown produce, an increasing number of consumers began to rely on the Mississippi Farmers Market as a source of information and as a place to purchase produce direct from Mississippi growers. An estimated 30,000 shoppers visited the MFM from its Grand Opening in June 2006 through December 2006. It was expected that the promotion program would increase customers shopping at the MFM by 20 percent from 2006 to 2007 and by 20 percent in 2008. The number of shoppers visiting the MFM from June 2007 (when shopper data began being recorded) to December 2007 increased by 50 percent from the previous year. In 2008, the number of shoppers increased an additional 10 percent during the same months in the previous year. It is important to note that the number of shoppers increased by 83 percent in the three-year period.



**A number of shoppers visit the Mississippi Farmer Market each week.**

Years	Expected Outcome	Actual Outcome
2006 to 2007	20% increase in customers shopping at the MFM.	The number of shoppers increased by 50% from 2006 to 2007.
2007 to 2008	20% increase in customers shopping at the MFM.	The number of customers shopping at the MFM increased by 10% from 2007 to 2008 (approximately an additional 4,500 shoppers).
2008 to 2009	Expected outcome not stated in proposal.	The number of customers shopping at the MFM increased by 11% from 2008 to 2009 (approximately an additional 5,300 shoppers).

### Measurable Outcome #2

The second outcome from implementing the specialty crop and MFM promotion is the increase in the number of farmers participating at the MFM in Jackson. From 2006 to 2009, the number of farmers certified to sell at the MFM increased by 45 percent from 65 farmers to 94 farmers. Not all of these farmers consistently participate in the market. As farmers realized that the crops they grow are being promoted and that the demand for these products is increasing, additional farmers began taking advantage of the opportunity to sell to the expanding customer base.

The MFM expected that the number of farmers participating in the market would increase by 20 percent from 2006 to 2007 and by 20 percent in 2008. During the peak produce season of 2006, an average of seven farmers consistently participated in the market on Saturdays, the busiest shopping day of the week. In 2007, the average number of farmers increased by 86 percent to 13. The average number of farmers remained steady in 2008 and declined to ten in 2009. As many as twenty growers were present at the market selling fresh produce on days that events were held.

Years	Expected Outcome	Actual Outcome
2006 to 2007	20% increase in farmers participating in the MFM.	The average number of farmers selling at the MFM during the peak produce season increased by 86%.
2007 to 2008	20% increase in farmers participating in the MFM.	The average number of farmers selling at the MFM during the peak produce season remained steady.
2008 to 2009	Expected outcome not stated in proposal.	The average number of farmers selling at the MFM decreased, but the variety and volume of available produce increased.

While the average number of farmers did decline from 2008 to 2009, produce availability in the market increased in both volume and variety. The farmers currently selling at the market have expanded their operations and provide shoppers with a larger variety and volume than previous years. There are several reasons for the decline in number of growers. From 2006 to 2009, the number of farmers markets in the state doubled. The increased number of farmers markets gave growers more options of places to sell their produce direct to the public. A few farmers that normally sold their produce exclusively at the MFM took advantage of having new markets located near their farms and split their time by selling at the MFM and these other markets. Moreover, extremely high fuel prices during the summer of 2008 caused some farmers to sell their fresh fruits and vegetables direct from their farm location rather than bring their goods to the market in order to save money on fuel. Also, a few of the farmers have retired.

Overall, this project was successful and positively impacted the Mississippi Farmers Market and Mississippi's specialty crop producers. According to the Mississippi Farmers Market Manager, Richard Butler, "The events that were held at the Farmers Market were not only instrumental in drawing shoppers to the market, they also made shoppers more aware of the types of produce that is grown in Mississippi and when certain produce is available during the year. Now, when shoppers visit the market, they are no longer disappointed when they can not find watermelons in October. They realize that buying fresh, locally grown produce means buying produce when it is in season, and they look forward to having different produce at different times of the year."

According to James Richmond, a farmer participating in the MFM, "Developing a vegetable produce farm on limited acreage on a pay-as-you-go basis requires a good market. The Mississippi Farmers Market offers farmers the ability to start marketing with small amounts of produce. Being able to sell directly to the consumer at retail prices provides a profit margin that allows the operation to grow. I am allowed to grow and market produce with out having to have a lot of additional labor. The growth of the farmers market over the last three years in the new building has allowed me to expand the varieties of produce I sell."



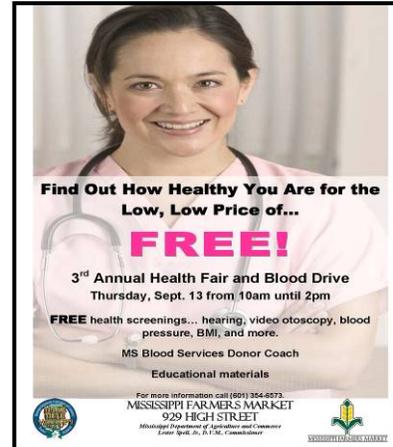
**Grower James Richmond sells a variety of fresh peppers at the Mississippi Farmers Market.**

## Additional Information

### A Sampling of Flyers Developed to Promote Events at the MFM.



**First Anniversary Celebration  
June 2, 2007**



**Health Fair and Blood Drive  
September 13, 2007**



**Sweet Potato Day  
September 29, 2007**



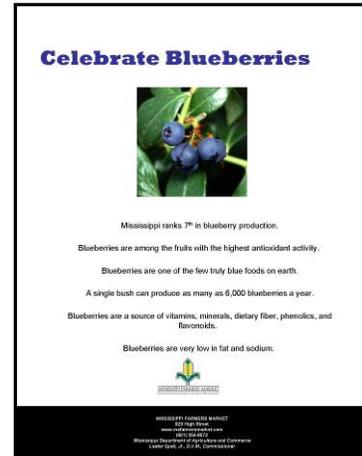
**Food for Thought  
November 17, 2007**



**Fall Harvest Fest  
October 25, 2008**



**Summer Kick-Off  
June 13, 2009**



**Celebrate Blueberries  
June 6, 2009**



**Front and back of an invitation  
sent to market shoppers  
promoting the First  
Anniversary Celebration on  
June 2, 2007.**

## Pictures of the Mississippi Farmers Market Events and Promotion



The MFM collaborated with the Mississippi Sweet Potato Council to promote sweet potatoes during Sweet Potato Day on Sept 29, 2007.



The MFM partnered with Mississippi Blood Services to host blood drives on September 13, 2007, and August 28, 2008.



During the peak of produce season, some vendors set up their booths in the aisles of the market because the stalls were full.



During Kids' Day held on August 4, 2007, kids had the opportunity to plant their own specialty crop seed and watch it grow.



Utilizing the radio to promote the MFM and specialty crops has proven to be successful.  
Left: A live interview with the market manager is broadcast through a live radio remote from the MFM.  
Right: A local chef joins the market manager on the *GardenMama* radio show to talk about various ways to prepare fresh fruits and vegetables and to give listeners a preview of dishes he will be preparing at the Market that week.



Farmers decorate their stalls for the Fall Harvest Fest held on October 25, 2008.



The MFM has become a community gathering spot where customers come to shop.



Market shoppers watch as amateur chefs have a cook-off against each other preparing dishes using fresh fruits and vegetables.



Customers begin lining up early to purchase fresh produce from Mississippi growers.



Events at the MFM have attracted many new shoppers to the market.



Local chefs often hold cooking demonstrations at the MFM to show customers how to easily prepare nutritious meals with fresh fruits and vegetables. Pictured is the chef from Julep, a popular Jackson restaurant.



Amateur chefs participate in the *Next Great Mississippi Homegrown Recipe Contest* on June 14, 2008. An estimated 5,000 shoppers attended the event at the MFM and purchased fresh produce from local farmers.



Farmers selling at the MFM sell a variety of fresh fruits and vegetables.

The volume and variety of fresh produce available at the MFM has increased each year since opening.

