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ROCHESTER, NY - Wouldn't it be great if that old-fashioned farm stand "moved" to your nearby Wegmans store, so tonight you could eat something picked just a few hours ago? Maybe you'd buy crunchy cucumbers, or luscious heirloom tomatoes, or super-sweet corn, or sun-kissed peaches. Well, guess what? More than two decades ago, that farm stand did move into Wegmans' produce department, so you don't have to drive to the country anymore for super-fresh fruit and vegetables.

Wegmans' Locally Grown program directly links family farms with customers at Wegmans stores. There's no distribution center or warehouse: What comes from the farm reaches the customer within a few hours. Here's how it works. Let's say the produce manager plans to sell 700 ears of corn the next day. She gets in touch with a nearby growing partner whose corn is ready for harvest, and he picks the 700 ears for Wegmans the next morning and trucks them immediately to the store, where eager shoppers snap them up.

Wegmans' Locally Grown program is good for the environment because it cuts fuel costs, which helps the company offer competitive prices to customers. But making it work smoothly with more than 800 growers, 71 Wegmans stores, and orders for every kind of fruit or vegetable in season does take some experience, and that's where someone like Kevin Komendat, Buffalo division produce coordinator, comes in. "We've been doing this for decades, and we know our growers and their families very well. We've also got some good systems in place so everybody wins -- the growers, our customers, and Wegmans." [Meet these growers yourself and learn more by clicking on the Locally Grown Produce box on the homepage at www.wegmans.com]

In winter, Komendat, Wegmans' Buffalo produce managers, and the local growers start planning for the next season. They talk about promising new varieties like Goldbar summer squash, a hybrid with better color and flavor than other yellow straightneck squashes, or about "exotic" vegetables, such as thumb-sized sweet peppers, orange cauliflower, striped heirloom tomatoes, or decorative pumpkins from tall and skinny to squat and round, and from bright orange to green-and-gold striped, or white. "The growers like trying something new, and we like giving customers more choice," says Komendat. Led by each division's produce coordinator, this same scenario plays out in each of Wegmans' market areas.

Environmental and food safety issues are also part of the discussion. "We want to recycle or reuse packaging as much as possible," says Komendat. "Some growers

are using a more recyclable kind of cardboard box, where others are using sturdier plastic boxes that can be washed and reused many times.” If a grower delivers to more than one Wegmans store in a day, Wegmans coordinates deliveries to save fuel and time.

Keeping food safe begins with proper hygiene at the farm, and Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), including how water, fertilizers, manure, and pesticides are used. “GAP is a nationally recognized certification program, and we’re asking all our grower partners to become GAP-certified this year,” Komendat says.

During growing season, Komendat works with growers in the Buffalo area to manage the bounty successfully. Example: When a bumper crop is on the horizon, the grower gives Komendat a “heads-up” and Komendat works with store managers on displays and special value pricing so customers can take advantage and stock up.

This year’s Locally Grown program will bring (weather permitting), the largest harvest yet to the “farmstands” in Wegmans stores. Look for lettuces, cabbage, green peas, broccoli crowns, strawberries, cherries, corn, cucumbers, cauliflower, green, yellow, striped and multi-color summer squashes, peppers, tomatoes, melons, peaches, plums, grapes, apples, Brussels sprouts, acorn, butternut and other winter squashes, and decorative heirloom pumpkins. “We’ll still be picking at Thanksgiving,” Komendat predicts.