

Jerad Gooch – Leoti Foods/Simply Produce

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Shopping in the produce aisle can take time, if one stops to look and study all the fruits and vegetables on display. If only those fruits and vegetables could be packaged together – maybe even with a recipe to help my family use them. Today we'll learn about an innovative program which is simplifying healthy food access, using a local food store and community support. Thanks to JoEllyn Argabright of K-State Research and Extension for this story idea. It's today's Kansas Profile.

Last week we learned about Extension's Culture of Health initiative. Here is an example of a local initiative to support healthy eating.

Jerad Gooch is the owner of Leoti Foods in Leoti, Kansas. His family has deep roots in the grocery business. His grandfather Harold Gooch opened the store in Tribune in 1948. Harold's son Dwight joined the business in 1972. Now the family owns three stores and Dwight's three sons manage one each. Jerad has the store in Leoti.

In 2015, some people in Leoti started to participate in a produce basket purchasing program which utilized out of state goods. "I noticed these baskets coming into town and I wondered why we couldn't do that with a local store," Jerad said. That program ended after a few months, but Jerad met with people who were interested to see if his store could provide such produce baskets.

In early 2017, the group launched a program called Simply Produce. This program provides fruit and vegetable baskets to local customers through the Leoti Foods store.

Every three weeks, there is a sign-up period from Friday to Tuesday for people who want to get a produce basket. People order the basket and pre-pay, at the store or by phone.

On the following Friday morning, the produce is delivered to a distribution point at the fairgrounds. Volunteers then sort the produce into baskets, which customers can pick up at noon. Jerad also delivers baskets to the school and to the elderly.

Typically, the baskets would include 12 items: Six fruits and six vegetables. The baskets cost \$15 each. Since the baskets might include up to 22 pounds of produce, this is a terrific value. Purchased separately, those items might amount to twice that in cost, not to mention the time spent shopping.

"We've had customers say, 'Wow, I get all that?'" Jerad said. "Some of our elderly ladies even share baskets." The store is now offering an additional mini-basket option.

Another popular option is the add-on baskets for an additional charge. For example, Leoti Foods recently offered an optional grill pack which includes ears of corn, sweet peppers, potatoes, squash, onions, mushrooms and more. All of these products would be great when prepared on my grill.

This makes shopping simple, which means that the name Simply Produce is especially appropriate. "This produce is delivered in the morning and is in the

consumer's hands by noon," Jerad said. "To get fresh produce in the hands of people that quickly in western Kansas is remarkable," he said.

"Everything about this has been great," Jerad said. Now their store in Tribune is using the same model. "We're averaging about 45 participants each time," Jerad said.

"It's not about the business, it's what's good for the community and about getting produce into people's hands," Jared said. He also noted the importance of volunteers in assembling the baskets.

Aimee Baker, the Family and Consumer Sciences agent for K-State Research and Extension – Wichita County, is one of his key volunteers. "She's been with us since day one," Jerad said. "She even makes a recipe card each time which correlates with the produce in the basket," he said.

This is an innovative, collaborative approach to help people get healthy produce while benefitting the local economy. It's great to find in a rural community like Leoti, population 1,534 people. Now, that's rural.

Shopping for produce can take time. We commend Jared Gooch of Leoti Foods, Aimee Baker, and all those involved with Simply Produce for making a difference with this project to help people utilize fruits and vegetables while utilizing their local store. I think it's high time.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.