



Vermont Housing &
Conservation Board

VERMONT FARM & FOREST
VIABILITY PROGRAM

Online Ordering Platforms for Farmers

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This outline is for farmers seeking options for selling food during the Stay-at-Home order in Vermont.

The options listed here are generalized and not intended for a specific farming operation. If you have specific needs, you may need to do further research to ensure a platform will work for your business. They should be utilized with production, processing and distribution systems that ensure customer, staff and producer safety.

Note that just having an online ordering platform is only a small part of the solution. Ongoing promotion and communication is needed to attract new customers and keep existing ones. Promoting your ordering option through social media, [Front Porch Forum](#), and an email list like [Mailchimp](#) will go a long way. Without the face-to-face contact, it is important to maintain contact virtually and with phone calls if it is suitable to your schedule.

Note about Processing Payments Remotely

For payment options, keep in mind that whenever you are accepting credit cards you will be charged a fee (typically 2.9% plus 30 cents per transaction). Receiving checks is generally free, but typically slows the speed (and amount) at which people are willing to purchase. Keep in mind some banks limit the number of checks you can deposit before they start charging you money for their time.

Online platforms will typically let you accept credit cards, but here are some other options:

- Ask customers to prepay by check, then order from your website with a “cash on delivery” type payment option at check out.
- QuickBooks Online has an ACH payment option on invoices with only a 1% fee (requires you to send an invoice and the customer to enter bank information).
- [Bill.com has a special offer](#) of no subscription fees for 3 months during COVID-19 lockdowns. Use Bill.com to accept payments using ACH for only 49 cents per payment (no percentage charge). This could be used to create invoices for CSAs, custom orders or wholesale accounts. It connects with QuickBooks so creating invoices in Bill.com would be in place of creating QuickBooks invoices. Make sure to cancel after 3 months to avoid \$39/month membership fees.
- Credit cards can be [stored on file with Square](#) and charged by you as customers place orders over the phone or on a website form but the fees are 3.5% and 15 cents per transaction.
- Many businesses are using PayPal’s “Send Money to a Friend” option or Venmo without paying fees, but this is against PayPal’s policy and they technically could reverse the payments you

receive. If you use PayPal to send invoices or accept credit card payments, you will be charged the regular fees.

The Most Basic Options for Online Sales

These options require the least amount of time to set up and are free (some have credit card fees that will apply). They would work for any type of farmer.

General technical skill level required: Very low

Cost: All of them are free

Time commitment & Where to Obtain Knowledge: Depending on your technological know-how, set up could take anywhere between 10 minutes and a few hours. If you are unfamiliar with the platforms, search YouTube for how-to videos, or search the platform's help database.

- 1) [Google Forms](#) – Allows you to create a basic form that customers can use to note what they want to order. This does not allow for payment, so checks would have to be mailed or invoices sent to customers. Responses are automatically collected and can be viewed in a spreadsheet and/or emailed to you.

Who it will work for: Any business wanting to collect information or accept orders without payment using an online form.

Cost: Free

Website & Technical requirements: None, but can be embedded in a website. Requires a Google/Gmail account. There are many videos on YouTube for support on how to set up and send a form.

General notes:

- Does not require website
- Easy to set up, flexible and easy to modify
- Information is secure
- Does NOT track inventory or allow for out of stock notices

How it can be used:

- Email a weekly order form to your customers with details on drop off location or pick up time and date. You can collect money outside of google forms via check, PayPal, Square invoices, or QuickBooks Invoices. Over the phone credit card payments can be processed with Square at a higher rate. You can provide a link in your form or follow up email to PayPal for payment. If customers prepay, keep track of their balance by using the spreadsheet of responses.
- Create a form that allows customers to sign up for CSA shares or meat shares (have them include delivery date and location), then follow up with an invoice.
- Share your Google Form link on Facebook, Instagram (link in bio), Front Porch Forum, Mailchimp or any other social media platform.

Examples: <https://driftfarmsteadvt.com/>

- 2) [Square](#) – Square is a popular payment processor at farmers markets (the little device that connects to smartphones). The same company offers a free online store.

Who it will work for: Any farm who wants to sell something online. It especially helpful for people already using square to sell at farmers markets or keep track of their inventory

Cost: The basic plan is free, but transactions will be charged 2.9% + 30 cents per transaction. There are different pay-for options with more features.

Website & Technical requirements: No existing website needed. Can be linked to from your existing website.

General notes:

- Designs are basic but perfectly functional and can be branded with your logo and colors.
- Helps to manage inventory.
- The free version will have square branding and sometimes ads. The domain name is provided by Square, so it may look a little less professional.
- While there are pay-for options that allow for a custom domain without ads, there is generally less flexibility than other platforms.
- Does support businesses who need to offer a shipping option in their store for local delivery or pickup.

How it can be used:

- Listing products for curbside pickup and local delivery.
- Keep track of inventory so you can sell online and in other locations as long as you process transactions in square.
- Add a link on your current website to your square store to add e-commerce functionality without having to modify your current website.
- Share link on social media and add to your profiles.

Examples: <https://foxtail-community-farm.square.site/> and <https://squareup.com/store/Fruitsdesvignesfarmstand>

- 3) [Paypal Buttons](#) – These buttons can be integrated in any website or Facebook Page for checkout on PayPal. This is the easiest way to accept payments for products with credit card. No need to set up an online store.

Who it will work for: Farmers who have one or two things they want to sell (CSA shares or a weekly box)

Cost: You will be charged 2.9% + 30 cents per transaction.

Website & Technical requirements: Existing website or Facebook Page required. You will need to log into Paypal and get a snippet of code to put into your website. There are many YouTube videos based on the type of website you have.

General notes:

- You can set up many products, but it is time intensive and you may be better off with an online store at that point.
- It will collect customer information during the checkout process, but there is not an option to submit a delivery date or other information. You will need to coordinate with customers outside of PayPal.

How it can be used:

- Send an e-newsletter or post on Social Media or Front Porch Forum with information about a weekly box of produce or meat and send them to your paypal button to make a payment. Coordinate delivery or pickup through phone or email (requires you to do some administrative work).
- Post on your website as a payment option for CSA.

Example: <https://tamarackhollowfarm.com/producebox/>

Adding Ecommerce to Existing Websites

These options are for farmers who have an existing website and want to add e-commerce, or update their existing e-commerce platform.

General technical skill level required: Low to moderate

Cost: Ecwid is Free (with credit card fees) up to \$18-\$99/month. If you have an existing plan with Squarespace, Wix or Weebly adding e-commerce may or may not add extra

Time commitment: Depends on the platform and your existing experience with the platform. The minimum would likely be an hour, with the potential for dozens of hours depending on the customization you need. Most people can set up a basic store in these platforms with the help of YouTube videos. If your technical skills are low or you have some custom needs, you can hire a professional to help with Squarespace, Wix, Weebly, Ecwid and WordPress websites. WordPress likely has the steepest learning curve but has the most capability. Food4All would have its own support.

- 1) [Squarespace](#), [Wix](#) and [Weebly](#) – If you already have a website with one of these platforms you can expand your subscription to include e-commerce. All three are fairly similar in terms of what they offer.

Who it will work for: Any farm who is already using one of these platforms and needs a basic option to sell their products on their website.

Cost: Upgrades can be anywhere in the \$6-\$30/month range. If you are starting a new website it will be around \$18-\$20/month for basic access to ecommerce tools. Credit card processing fees are generally 2.9% plus 30 cents per transaction

Website & Technical requirements: Can be integrated with existing website on the same platform, or you can create a new website on each platform. It is relatively easy to set up and add products, but there is a bit of learning curve to design it how you want.

General notes:

- It is proprietary software so you are limited in how you can customize. Plugins are limited to what the company provides.
- Is generally a better set up for product-oriented businesses that don't need constant communication with customers.
- Squarespace is not Square! They are two different companies and you cannot accept payments through Square on Squarespace. Most of these platforms for you to choose certain payment processors.

How it can be used:

- Remote ordering of farm products. For Squarespace, make sure to add [delivery instructions to checkout](#) if needed or customize shipping options to [include local pickup](#).
- Sell CSA shares by setting up different options for share sizes or payment options.

Examples: <http://www.fullplatefarmers.com/sign-up>

- 2) [Ecwid](#) – Ecwid is a powerful e-commerce application that can be used on its own and/or integrated in a number of other website and social media platforms

Who it will work for: A farm who wants to develop a standalone online store, or integrate with Facebook, Instagram, Squarespace, Wix, Weebly, WordPress and more. It's helpful if you want to sell on multiple locations online.

Cost: Free for use in multiple online stores (use their domain name or integrate in your own website), additional options \$15-\$99/month to sell on Facebook and other platforms and to get extra features like inventory, a smartphone app to manage store, coupons and gift cards.

Website & Technical requirements: This integrates well with just about any website. The integration process is a little technical, but their support is helpful in taking you through the process step by step. Setting up the store is very straightforward and fast. It has a user-friendly interface.

General notes:

- Easy to set up and provides security necessary to accept payments online.
- Free version works well; option to also have Point-of-Sale system for in person sales.
- Can use Square for payment processing, but requires some extra set up time.

How it can be used:

- Remote ordering for pickup or delivery
- Sell CSA shares of different sizes
- To embed products in Facebook or other platform

Examples: <https://store22409479.shopsettings.com/>

- 3) [WordPress](#) & [WooCommerce](#) – WordPress is much more than just “blogging” software. If you already have a WordPress website, you can add one of the most widely used ecommerce platforms, WooCommerce (a plugin).

Who it will work for: A farmer who needs to customize their e-commerce platform to meet their needs.

Cost: Free, additional plugins available for a yearly fee. Credit card fees of 2.9% plus 30 cents per transaction (can choose to have people pay in advance by check for no fee).

Website & Technical requirements: An existing WordPress website is required to install plugin. While WooCommerce is getting easier to use, there is a steep learning curve and can take more time and technical knowledge/patience to set up. It helps to have a WordPress theme that is specifically compatible with WooCommerce.

General notes:

- The software is open source so there is unlimited capacity to expand. There is a huge market for plugins that work with WooCommerce, so just about any customization you can think of is either available or possible if you hire a developer.
- If you want to process payments on your website you will need an SSL certificate (Bluehost offers a free one with a hosting package, but many other hosting companies will charge money in the \$29-\$100/year range), otherwise you can send people over to PayPal for payment.
- Note there is a big difference between Wordpress.com and Wordpress.org. The .com arm is a commercial entity much like Squarespace and Weebly. You will want to use Wordpress.org, which requires that you have your own hosting space like Bluehost, Godaddy or GreenGeeks.

How it can be used:

- Remote sales for delivery or pickup (set Shipping options)
- To sell CSA shares
- To offer different prices for Wholesalers, Chefs, Retail Customers (with [Wholesale Suite Plugin](#))
- Connect with Mailchimp to allow for targeted emails to customers (examples: CSA reminders, or follow ups with people who ordered specific products)

- Unlimited possibility with plugins, some require payment, some free (memberships and automatic credit card payments, prepaid credits on customer accounts, order by the pound, print invoices/pick lists/packing list, set delivery dates)
- To aggregate sellers with a multi-vendor plugin like <https://www.wcvendors.com/> to allow multiple farmers to list their products on one website

Examples: <https://pigasmusmeats.com/shop/>
<https://smallaxefarm.com/shop/>

- 4) [Food4All](#) - Works as a plugin similar to Ecwid that can be embedded in your existing website or Facebook page, but designed specifically for farmers and food producers. Includes a mobile Point of Sale option for in person sales.

Who it will work for: Farmers who need to manage different prices for wholesale and retail and set availability dates.

Cost: Fees are taken on each payment. Buyers pay 95 cents + 2.5% (capped at \$9.95). Farmers pay 30 cents + 3.4% for each credit card order (checks are free).

Website requirements: You can embed in your own website or on Facebook. Low technical knowledge required.

General notes:

- Note that the fees are mostly passed on to the buyers. You would only pay something close to a typical credit card processing fee.
- Allows you to market your farm online and connect with other buyers, but it is unclear how helpful this is.

How it can be used:

- For farmers who are active on Facebook and want their customers to be able to order on Facebook.
- To create an online shop that allows wholesalers and retailers to buy products at different prices.

Standalone Ecommerce Options

These options are for farmers who have specific needs such as CSA's that allow for custom ordering each week, farmers that have different pricing structures for wholesale vs. retail, or for farmers who are managing a food hub. They do not require an existing website and can work on their own. In general, these options are more expensive, but provide more features with less set up and know-how.

General technical skill level required: Very low to moderate

Cost: Generally more expensive than other options (\$29-\$299/month plus set up fees and some much higher transactions fees like 7%)

Time commitment: Depends on the platform and your existing technical knowledge. In general, these options have their own support teams and are designed in a way that are easy to use and quick to set up.

- 1) [Shopify](#) – Likely the most popular e-commerce platform, but it is expensive and not necessarily suited for farmers. You can build a website with an online store on their platform, and it can also be integrated with WordPress and some website platforms

Who it will work for: A farmer with expendable income for their online platform that is willing to spend more money for some customizable features.

Cost: Monthly fees range \$29-\$299. Plugins have additional fees. Credit card fees of 2.9% plus 30 cents per transaction

Website & Technical requirements: No existing website needed. Shopify will create a website on a custom domain you choose. Relatively easy to set up, but there is a learning curve to figure out the more complex set up.

General notes:

- It's easy to use, but for the options available with the base option (\$29/month), you may as well use another platform.

How it can be used:

- A basic e-commerce store where customers can view your products in a picture gallery and add items to a cart. They will check out with a credit card.
- Many capabilities with plugins (Multi-Vendor/Aggregate selling with multiple farmers, pricing specific to wholesalers, set delivery date)

Examples: <https://www.fuelme.fi/>

- 2) [Farmigo](#) – Farmigo is set up specifically for managing CSA's or Food Hubs

Who it will work for: Farmers who need to manage deliveries to many customers for their CSA or custom orders

Cost: 2% of deliveries (\$150/month minimum). Only charged during the months you deliver

Website requirements: No existing website needed

General notes:

- Helps you track which customers have paid and see their past deliveries
- Helps plan deliveries
- Allows you to generate printable labels that can be attached to each physical order

How it can be used:

- To manage CSA, custom orders, or custom CSA deliveries. Members are added to the system and can make payments and place orders of products you list.

- 3) [Barn2Door](#) – Barn2Door offers an online store with some built in features that would help farmers like prepaid deposits, reminders and newsletters, price sheets for different audiences, integration with QuickBooks and Mailchimp

Who it will work for: Farmers who want to be able to sell their products or CSA shares and send emails in one platform, or need to set up different prices for wholesalers and retail customers and don't want to use Shopify or WooCommerce.

Cost: \$59-\$99 per month with a onetime set up fee of \$299-\$499

Website requirements: No existing website needed. The Standard subscription will give you a webstore only, the plus subscription will give you a website. With their support, it should be very easy to set up your store.

General notes:

- Seems a bit pricy for what they offer, but could be useful for people who don't want to worry about managing their technology

How it can be used:

- As an online store that is customized to distinguish pricing to different groups of customers
- Automate emails to remind customers to place custom orders

- 4) [Harvie](#) – Specifically for CSA farms, helps farmers manage their CSA share with flexible sizes and weeks

Who it will work for: Farmers who have a complicated CSA set up that allows for flexible orders and weeks and need to communicate customers frequently about their order. Compare with Farmigo.

Cost: \$500 one time set up fee, 7% transaction fee, 2.9% + \$0.30 per transaction

Website requirements: No existing website needed, but it would still be help to have a website to attract customers. The Harvie portal would be separate from your website. Appears to be straightforward in terms of setting up.

General notes:

- Takes the pains out managing a CSA, but at a steep cost
- They advertise your CSA on their website, but it's unclear how much value this holds

How it can be used:

- To manage a CSA share that is customizable

Examples: <https://www.harvie.farm/profile/root-5-farm>
<https://www.harvie.farm/profile/walker-farm>

- 5) [Local Food Marketplace](#) – Has two separate packages; one for farms who want unlimited price lists, harvest lists/pack lists/labels, delivery route management and another for Food Hubs that also includes communication with producers, aggregation & delivery routes, and inventory tracking.

Who it will work for: Farmers who want to manage custom orders with wholesalers, individuals, or restaurants. Food hubs that need to keep track of ordering and set up deliveries.

Cost: \$499-\$999 set up fee. \$79-\$149 per month. Additional fees for extra producers (more than one farm), subscription management etc.

For Food Hubs, \$499-\$1,499 set up fee and \$79-\$229 per month with limitations on named distribution days

Website requirements: No existing website needed, but it would still be help to have a website to attract customers. Local Food Marketplace would have its own portal separate from your website. Appears to be straightforward in terms of setting up.

General notes:

- Seems to offer more features than other platforms, but also has a menu of additional options that require payment.

How it can be used:

- To manage a custom orders, picking lists, and delivery planning
- To manage a Food Hub

- 6) [Local Line](#) –Local Line has two different products, one for Farmers who want to manage custom orders and another for Food Hubs. There is also an option for putting your Farmers Market online which can be useful if the Stay-at-Home Order extends into the summer.

Who it will work for: Farmers who want to manage custom orders and deliveries or pickups. Food Hubs who need an online system to manage their orders, suppliers, deliveries and customers. Compare with Local Food Marketplace. Does not allow for pricing levels at the base level.

Cost: Free for basic website. \$49/month for farmers & CSAs, \$79/month for Food Hubs, \$15/month for each vendor in a farmers market

Website requirements: No existing website needed. Appears to be straightforward in terms of setting up.

General notes:

- Features for farmers include pick lists, pack lists and invoices
- Keeps track of inventory
- Does not mention the ability to handle price lists for different groups
- Cheaper than Local Food Marketplace, but offers less features so make sure it has what you need

How it can be used:

- To manage a custom orders for retail customers
- To run a remote farmers market during a lockdown
- To run a Food Hub

- 7) [Cropolis](#) - Specifically for farms that sell direct to restaurants and customers and need an order form. Manage inventory

Who it will work for: Vegetable farmers selling directly to customers or restaurants and want to streamline the ordering, invoicing, and picking process.

Cost: \$29/month for up to 40 orders/month, \$49/month for up to 160 orders/month and accept credit card payments, \$99/month for more than 160 orders

Website requirements: No existing website needed. Seems to be easy to use.

General notes:

- Builds all of your invoices, pick lists, pack lists, pack slips, sales reports and QuickBooks import files

How it can be used:

- To manage the ordering and invoicing process for a custom vegetable order farm

- 8) [Happy CSA](#) – For CSA farms management

Who it will work for: CSA farms who want to manage information about their members

Cost: \$29-\$349 per month based on number of members

Website requirements: No existing website needed. Seems to be easy to use.

General notes:

- Developed by a CSA farm
- Unclear what options are available for custom ordering
- Offers a database of members to track harvest lists and print labels

How it can be used:

- To manage a CSA

9) [Open Food Network](#) – An open-source solution developed by a nonprofit organization, their main focus is on helping farmers collaborate to sell food through food hubs. They also offer an option for individual farms to create an online shop.

Who it will work for: Farmers with a little bit of extra time or technical know-how who want a low-cost option to selling their products online or collaborating with other farmers to develop a food hub.

Cost: Opening and running a shop on OFN is free up to \$500 of monthly sales. If you sell more you can choose your community contribution between 1% and 3% of sales.

Website requirements: No existing website needed. Relatively easy to use, but a little more laborious in the set up process compared to some other platforms

General notes:

- You will need to [reference the user guide](#) to get set up as it is not intuitive.
- Limited in options, but since it is open-sourced there is a possibility for unlimited customization with the help of developers.
- Does not appear to have an option for price levels for wholesale vs. retail.
- Can be integrated with Mailchimp and Xero (QuickBooks may be possible but is not currently offered).
- This could work for a simple Food Hub, but does not have the same features as some more expensive software options like aggregating orders and mapping deliveries.

How it can be used:

- To list products available for order with a deadline date
- To manage a food hub with neighboring farmers to be able to sell collectively