

“Eat Fresh! Eat Local!” Back in 2008, teacher Hans Estrin’s ecology students at The Putney School heard that rallying cry and launched a well-intentioned project: Take the surplus from the 3-acre garden at the private and progressive Putney School and donate it for lunches at the public Putney Central Elementary School, just down the hill. “It was a great idea!” says Hans. “Our gardens had surplus, and the public school could certainly use some fresh produce.”

And it was a complete flop.

### **Working in Partnership to Create an Effective System**

What seemed like such a simple thing to accomplish was more challenging in reality than anyone expected. Hans explains it this way: “

**The plan failed miserably, largely because there was no system to connect the food with the school**

.” Garden surplus appeared suddenly but often there would be no one around to load and truck it down the hill to Putney Central. And even when it did get delivered, frequently the food went to waste because the week’s menu at the public school was already planned and in preparation, and there were too few ready hands to do the extra processing that garden-fresh foods require.

Hans spent the next year pitching what he good-humoredly calls a “half-baked idea,” ferreting out willing partners from among the like-minded people he already knew—and some he soon got to know. Within a few months, Hans was able to sell his half-baked idea to two more important players: Jamie Baribeau, director of food and nutrition at Brattleboro Memorial Hospital, and John Ayer, the head of food service for Brattleboro Union High School.

In the fall of 2009, Windham Farm and Food (WFF) was officially launched as a “sub-company” within Harlow’s Westminster Organics. The plan at that point was elegantly simple: offer schools an online inventory and ordering system, weekly deliveries in one of Westminster Organics’ refrigerated trucks leased by the mile, and 30-days net invoicing.

And it worked.

### **Delivering Produce from 30 Farms to Over 60 Clients**

Since its grassroots beginnings that first season, WFF has grown by more than 400 percent, now managing deliveries from more than 30 farms to more than 60 business clients, schools and nonprofit institutions in the Windham County region. Says Hans: “There are a lot of

organizations in Windham County that want easy and affordable access to locally produced food. In 2012, sales were more than \$140,000—and a full 85 cents of every dollar of goods sold by WFF goes straight back to the farmer.”

### **Growing from Strength to Strength**

With such rapid growth, the elegantly simple plan has morphed into a system of considerable complexity. Local farmers and vendors of high-quality, value-added food products input the inventory they have available into the online Harvest-to-Market website created by software engineer Andrew Waters. Notification of the week’s products is emailed to registered clients. Orders for delivery on Tuesdays must be placed via the website by 8:00 am on Monday; orders for Friday delivery by 8:00 am Thursday. Since its grassroots beginnings that first season, WFF has grown by more than 400 percent.

Just as a half-baked idea became a functioning reality thanks to the cooperative efforts of a committed group of enthusiastic individuals, important relationships forged with nonprofit organizations—such as the University of Vermont Extension, and Post Oil Solutions, a nonprofit whose mission includes increasing local access to local food—helped WFF evolve.

### **A Four Year Transformation**

Now that Vermont’s local food movement is tackling issues of access, storage, and delivery, these Windham County programmes can serve as examples of creative, grassroots, small-scale programmes that work. In just four years, the humble and fragile beginnings of WFF —“a half-baked idea”—have evolved into a self-sustaining, economically viable, and easily replicable system for achieving what should be so very simple: making fresh, healthy food from hard-working small producers affordable and available to all the people who live nearby.

[Click to read the original article](#)