

Voices of Double Up in America

Farmer



Located in west Michigan's farm belt, Green Meadow Produce is a 72-acre vegetable farm. Owner Robert Bylstra sells seven months of the year at the Muskegon Farmers Market where Double Up Food Bucks has made a substantial difference for his business. Robert is Amish and farms the land in Fremont with the help of his wife and two of his daughters.

Here are his words.

“**MY GRANDFATHER** was a farmer and my dad was a farmer, but he was also a contractor. At 22 years old, I had an elderly gentleman help me out getting started in farming, milking cows and doing crops. I loved it, so when I moved from Maryland to Michigan in '91, we just kept farming and milking cows.

In '95, we started with the vegetables. After four years, we sold the cows, and we do only vegetables now because that's where my heart is. I love plants. I love to watch things grow. I also like the idea of doing something where I'm feeding the people. We're actually feeding healthy food to people who enjoy buying healthy food.

We grow about 80 different items. We have the full line of vegetables and greens: zucchini, yellow squash, cucumbers, pickles, watermelon, cantaloupes, sweet corn, tomatoes, peppers—lots of different varieties of peppers—and tomatoes. Then you've got cabbage, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussels sprouts, and then a lot of different lettuces,

spinach, and then all your herbs, chives, onions, potatoes.

We have about a 100-customer CSA. We sell a little bit here at the house just for the neighbors as kind of a service to the community, and then we do have a wholesale outlet that we might sell five percent to if we have extra. We sell 80 percent of what we grow at the farmers market.

The Muskegon Farmers Market is Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. We try to be a one-stop shop because we have a lot of customers who come to us because we are the only large grower that farms with no chemicals or pesticides. There are some smaller growers there that do have things that are not sprayed, but they don't have the variety and they're not there three days a week. Or they might only come three months out of the year, whereas we are there seven months of the year: the whole season. For that reason we try to have a larger variety for people with the Double Up Bucks to be able to buy it from us.

Double Up Farmer

We've been participating in Double Up Food Bucks ever since it started. We were doing the [EBT-generated, SNAP] tokens anyway, and if I look back at the records, the first year we only did about \$1,500 to \$1,700 a year. Once Double Up started, that went up about 400 or 500 percent. You know, up to \$8,000 to \$10,000 a year with Double Up.

Since we are homegrown certified at the Muskegon Farmers Market, meaning that we only sell what we grow ourselves, 100 percent of everything that we sell is usable with the Double Up tokens. About five to seven percent of the income from the farm actually is from Double Up. That's not huge, but if you're talking about a couple hundred thousand dollars, then five percent is still pretty good. We would lose something if it wasn't for the Double Ups. It's helping us make a living. Where the money actually goes to, whether for buying equipment or for workers, it helps us make a living. It really does. All farmers want to participate if they have fresh Michigan produce. I've never seen one who didn't want to.

We have a lot of people ask us if we take EBT cards, and we say, "No, but you can go to the office and get tokens and you get Double Up. You get twice as much." We have sent dozens and dozens of people up to the office in the last few years who were not aware that they could slide their EBT cards and get Double Up Food Bucks.

That's what Double Up is all about: being able to get fresh Michigan fruits and vegetables, grown locally, that were picked within the last 24 hours, onto the customer's table when they usually would not be able to afford to. It costs a lot of money to feed a family, and so they come to the market and instead of having \$20 to buy vegetables they have \$40 to buy vegetables.

I think we've gotten more and different customers because of Double Up. Some people come to the farmers market only with EBT cards. I see a lot of regular customers with the Double Ups who would probably not be able to buy fresh Michigan produce without them.

It is a blessing for people who have children, especially moms who are trying to feed their children healthy food. I see some coming to buy things to can for the season—their tomatoes, pickles, potatoes. They're buying them mostly with the Double Ups that they've been saving to do that.



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Robert Bylstra
Owner

Green Meadow Produce

We get a lot of children that come, and I love it because I love children. I used to be a teacher years ago. I do a couple little magic tricks for the children. They love to come, and so it's fun for us. They'll be a hundred feet away, and I hear them yell, "Hi, Robert!" We really enjoy it. I play with the children. My wife sells the produce to the parents.

I have some elderly people too, some seniors, that come almost every week spending Double Up for their food. I mean without Double Up they would not be able to buy the fresh vegetables that they're buying.

It's a win-win situation because the customer is getting \$20 worth of free food so to speak, and yet we're getting paid for our fruits and vegetables that we grow. It also helps people be more aware of shopping local and getting more fresh fruits and vegetables. I don't know how you can make it better, really. It's one of the best programs I've ever seen."