



Season 2 Episode 12 – Sweet Grown Alabama Part 2

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Speaker 1

Welcome to the Farming Basics Podcast with Olivia Fuller. We'll have sustainable farming tips from growers across the state and extension specialists at Auburn University.

Olivia Fuller

Alrighty, welcome back. Today we have that episode as promised, Sweet Grown, Alabama featured. We have Aisling Fields, the assistant director of sweet Grown right now, and Meredith, who is new, and we're excited to introduce her to the world. So thanks for coming on both of you. So sweet grown Alabama. Some of the farmers I know are familiar. You've done a great job marketing this to the state and it's really taken off and it's, and kind of still a new program, but what, tell the new farmers that may not know or have heard and not sure give a your, your elevator pitch on what sweet girl in Alabama is and what it does for the farmers.

Aisling Fields

Thank you so much about talking about Sweet Grown Alabama and we are a fairly new program. We were started back in 2019, so we we've made huge strides. I mean, like you said, we have a new team member. We are constantly growing in numbers and I we're just at a drop in the bucket of where we wanna be, but we are making continuous strides, which is so amazing. But sweet Grown Alabama is our state's nonprofit agricultural branding program. So we help farmers and farm stands, farmers' markets, anyone who is in agriculture trying to

sell their product, we help them find consumers and help market their product because, you know, there are you, you don't have time to market your product when you're working in the fields every day.

Olivia Fuller

Farmers are one of the few people in positions that do so many things that it's not like, okay, this is not part of my job description, but they have to still do it.

Aisling Fields

Yes. And a lot of farmers have full-time jobs, young children, I mean, they are farming, so they need to sell their product, but a lot of times they have a hard time finding that outlet. And so we wanna be able to help them.

Olivia Fuller

I love that. I love what it's doing for the, the farmers. I've seen like we heard in the last episode, how it's helping them even get more money. So that's, that's huge, right? Not just market, but get more money for what they're marketing. Right?

Aisling Fields

We are constantly trying to put money back into the hands of farmers. That is our sole purpose is to help farmers make more money into market their products and to meet more consumers

Olivia Fuller

All while taking the weight off of them to figure out how do I market this? Right? It's a sweet potato, it sells itself,

Aisling Fields

Right? So we do a lot of this through traditional marketing, social media that's Instagram, Facebook. We do a monthly e-newsletter that goes out to around 7,000 people, and those are people that are specifically looking to buy local. So that's a lot of the stuff that we're already doing. But then we have grown and have been able to hire a new person to get our farmers into more avenues. So grocery stores, restaurants, all of that fun stuff

Meredith has really taken on. And so we are so happy to have her and to have her knowledge with these resources to get farmers being able to sell their product in a, in a new area.

Olivia Fuller

That's great. That's one of the questions I get so often after I've helped them with the technical side of how do you grow a sweet potato? What, what kind of fertilizer? What, what, how should you, should you cover crop? You know, all the like technical side of things. Then they come to me and they're like, okay, well I have all these sweet potatoes. I wanna sell it Piggly Wiggly. Okay, well I don't have the contact for you, so I don't know how to, where to send them at that point. So now I send them to Meredith. This is great <laugh>.

Meredith

Absolutely. Send them on my way.

Olivia Fuller

What would you do first? So you're, you're, you're brand new. I won't put you on the spot too much, but what would be your first steps in, in this position as you're trying to figure out the farmer's needs and, and they're calling you wanting to get into grocery stores? How do you help them? Absolutely,

Meredith

Olivia. I think that's a great question. I had a mentor when I was at Auburn tell me that usually the folks that you're working with know way more than you are ever going to know. So first I kind of tap into that base and I ask them, all right, so what, what stores are close to your farm? What is in your surrounding area? What kind of markets do you already have available where you can see your products? And I would say most of the time they have some places that they want me to go ahead and call. So, so they know the lay of the land, they know where their products are probably going to move off of shelves. So I usually end up reaching out to someone in management at those stores. I'll call, I'll try to get in touch with a store manager, produce buyer.

Every store does it a little differently is what I'm learning. Some stores have certain requirements when it comes to food safety audits. So I've been learning a lot about those different types of programs. I gather information from the produce buyer or the store manager and I asked them, you know, do y'all have a need for this type of product? I've never been turned down. I found that people really love local products. They love sweet Grown Alabama and they really wanna help out their local agriculture producers. So that's kind of what that process looks like.

Olivia Fuller

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Aisling Fields

Right. And we have a number of grocery stores that are also sweet grown Alabama members in our database. And so a bunch of those are already carrying local products. And Meredith has made great contacts with those, you know, continuing to help them find more farmers and to get more farmers' products on those grocery store shelves.

Olivia Fuller

That's huge for the farmers. That, so that brings up a question of you wouldn't necessarily help the farmers directly move through the paperwork that they need to fill out for the food safety requirements, for example, but you'll be that kind of middleman getting them that information as to what do they even need to think about to then maybe reach out to extension and get that food safety certification or meet the requirements? 'cause I know each farm, each well, farmer's market, yeah, but each grocery store and like specialty market can make their own demands. And that's just so confusing for the farmers 'cause they, each one is, is so different.

Meredith

And a farmer that's on the back of a tractor all day or is trying to get crops outta of the field does not have time to try to figure out, okay, who's the store manager? What type of food safety audit do I need? So that really is where my role comes in. Once I make that contact with the produce manager, I connect them back with the farmer. The farmer's gonna be able to tell their story way better than I will ever be able to because they work in it day in and day out. So at that point we pass over responsibility. They're able to complete the paperwork if they have any more questions. I have definitely on multiple occasions referred farmers to food safety extension agents and they have been incredibly helpful. I feel like y'all do a great job keeping up to date communicating with the Department of Public Health, which is huge. So that's just a little bit of what that process ends

Olivia Fuller

Up. So you would connect them, let them make the introduction, sell their product themselves, and then kind of hold their hand a bit on the paperwork that they need to meet. 'cause it, it's just so confusing with like the what to put on the label. You know, like, do I need to barcode of what, what should I price it at? What, what's your level of involvement on those details?

Meredith

We do a little bit of looking at labels. We love to see our sweet grown Alabama logo placed on those labels. That way when any consumer picks up that package, they know that that product was grown in Alabama, processed in Alabama, they're getting a fresh local product. So we love to see our sweet grown logo on those products. But it, it really is facilitating those conversations and making sure that not only is the store manager aware of their product, but also the agricultural producer knows exactly what they need on their product in order to be successful in that grocery store.

Olivia Fuller

That's exciting, that's a great program to look forward to. So we've talked a lot about the grocery store aspect, but you said earlier that you had a, a database that the grocery stores were in, but I know you've done so much with the farmer's markets already and connecting farmers with that and, and so many other things that I don't even know that y'all have done. So tell me a little bit about this database.

Aisling Fields

100%. So our database@sweetgrownalabama.org is full of all of our sweet grown Alabama members. You can go onto this data, this online searchable database and type in your zip code, what product you're looking for, and there's even a dropdown for those grocery stores, farmers' markets. There's agritourism, you pick operations and you can find farmers and farm stands and all of those right in your backyard. So

Olivia Fuller

This is for our consumers listening. Yes, yes.

Aisling Fields

If you are a consumer and you are wanting to buy local products and to support local agriculture, you can visit our website and use that database to find farmers right in your backyard.

Olivia Fuller

That's really cool. So the database is for like the consumer to utilize, to find what's in their area. How do the farmers use that to maybe network amongst themselves?

Aisling Fields

Right. So when you join our program, you get a username and password to your database page, and you can totally customize that however you would like. You get to put in a bio your address, phone number, email, and then actually get to tell the consumers a little bit about yourself. You know, you want to, you wanna tell them that you are a fourth-generation farmer or you've got kids helping you out on the farm, or whatever you have that you want the consumer to know about you is really where you would portray that in that database page. You can put your own social media handles and if you even wanna put pictures and videos, you can send those over my way and we can make sure that that is uploaded for you.

Olivia Fuller

Y'all are marketing experts. You, you've really done an incredible job. I've, I've loved watching get, develop over the years since Ellie began. So that's, it's really cool what you're doing for the farmers here. What if they want to find out more, if they're listening and they, they want to find out how to join, perhaps what would, what would we suggest them do?

Aisling Fields

If you are wanting to join Sweet Grown Alabama, I would suggest to go to our website@sweetgrownalabama.org and click on that join now button in the top right corner. It has all of the information and there's a short little little questionnaire about yourself that you can fill out, and it goes straight back to my email and then we can get you put into our system.

Olivia Fuller

Perfect. Thanks so much for coming on both of you, and happy to have you on board, Meredith. Thanks, Olivia.

Speaker 1

This has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.