

Canopy Safety 101: Your Guide to Canopy Safety at Washington's Farmers Markets

Most accidents at farmers markets involve canopies. It is your job to minimize the risk. There are two general rules regarding canopies, which all vendors and site managers need to remember:

- * Always fully secure your canopy to the ground.
- * Be sure that your method of securing your canopy to the ground does not itself create an additional hazard.

Good Canopy Weight; Bad Canopy Weight

The Pacific Northwest is famous for its unpredictable weather, diverse climates and micro-climates, and often strong, gusty, and unpredictable winds. The La Niña effect during the 1999 season not only brought us a lot of rain, it also brought us remarkable winds. And while market vendors use canopies to shield them from the rains, and this occasional odd phenomenon we have here called “the sun”, our region's winds can turn our canopies into deadly missiles with one unexpected gust. In fact, in 1999, almost every market in Washington reported some sort of problem with canopies taking flight as a result of unexpected winds. Fortunately, only one person was hurt all season, and there was only one report of resultant property damage. Nevertheless, there is no good excuse, short of freak equipment failure or an extraordinary act of nature, for a canopy to take flight. (It should be noted that the one person hurt by a flying canopy was indeed the combined result of freak equipment failure and divine intervention.

Bottom line: Always expect wind!

You should always have your canopy secured to the ground. It is not enough to have the tools necessary to secure your canopy on hand if you do not employ them. Strong gusts can come up without warning anywhere in the state. After the first gust catapults your canopy like a rocket powered javelin through the nearest windshield, or into a customer or fellow vendor, it is already too late to decide to secure your canopy. You should assume winds will come. Indeed, they often do. Winds that caused canopies to lift off the ground in 1999 occurred in the afternoon. While vendors experienced calm conditions upon morning setup, conditions had changed dramatically by afternoon breakdown.

Additionally, canopies are most vulnerable during setup and breakdown periods. Stay alert. During the peak business hours of markets, the mere presence of hundreds of shoppers, along with the tight configuration of all the vendors, creates a disruption in the flow of wind, reducing its force through the market. But at setup and breakdown times, the shoppers are gone, the solid block of vendors is disrupted, and you are at some point in the process of setting up or taking down your canopy. Both accidents involving canopies in 1999 happened at the end of the market day. You must be sure to completely secure your canopy as soon as you set it up, and take down your canopy as soon as you remove its ground moorings at the end of the day. Do NOT let yourself be interrupted by

ANYTHING in the middle of this process, as a half-secured canopy is as dangerous, if not more dangerous, than an unsecured canopy. They flip. They crumple. They do weird things!

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly... Canopy Weights

The safety of farmers market shoppers should be the goal of every market's vendors and staff. And in general, farmers markets are statistically among the safest places in our country. Nevertheless, canopy weights needlessly continue to pose hazards at many farmers markets. Perhaps this is because we are not looking at how we set up our canopies and stalls each day from the perspective of the customer. After all, we are used to being the vendor or manager. But take a minute to really think about it from the customer's point of view...

* Where is the average farmers market customer looking when they walk through the market?

The average customer is looking at the bountiful tables filled with every sort of fresh fruits and vegetables, processed foods, crafts and so on. In other words, they are looking straight ahead, not down!

* Where are your canopy weights located?

Most canopy weights are located on the ground, or above the head. The customer is not looking where they are. Thus, if the canopy weights are in the path of the customer, the customer will trip over it, kick it, get entangled with it, etc. Therefore, we need to anticipate this ahead of time, and place canopy weights carefully, using materials that are least likely to injure.

Good Canopy Weights

Here is an example of a tent stake just like the one above, only this one has a brightly colored soft foam cover on it. That way, the customer's attention is drawn downward by the color to see the hazard, and in the case they fail to see the bright cover, the foam will soften the blow of any impact...

The PVC pipe filled with cement hangs on the inside of the canopy pole, and it has soft edges and the ability to move, just in case someone still manages to collide with it. Also a water-filled milk jug tucked into the corner pocket of the canopy, and presumably above the heads of the customer works as an anchor. And water jugs are flexible!

Bad canopy weights – anything hard that someone can trip on - cement blocks, cement bags, stakes uncovered.