

Building the Capacity of the Northwest Arkansas Food System



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Abstract

Farmers' markets are popular and successful in Northwest Arkansas (NWA), however a significant amount of produce goes unsold at the end of the day. Alternative markets are not well developed in NWA, despite a strong local foods awareness. The University of Arkansas, the Fayetteville Farmers' Market (FFM) and the Fayetteville Public School (FPS) district collaborated to determine the potential for local foods aggregation and distribution in NWA. Project activities included 1) a survey of institutional markets to identify interest and barriers for using local foods, 2) a pilot project between the FFM Co-op and the FPS Farm-to-School (F2S) program with collective bidding and ordering, 3) develop USDA approved recipes featuring local foods, 4) increase local foods use and awareness among students, parents and staff, 5) equip school kitchens to handle local produce, and 6) meet with stakeholders and advisory board members to determine the feasibility of an aggregation distribution system in NWA. The activities in this project revealed barriers to scale up the NWA local food system as well as opportunities including identifying grower training needs, new enterprises such as an aggregation and distribution system and interest of institutional markets. Next steps will be to facilitate opportunities to further advance the NWA local food system with community networks and partnerships.

Fig. 1 Barriers to using locally grown produce were rated on a scale of 1 to 5. n=27

Question	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
We lack information on how to order locally grown produce.	0.0%	11.5%	7.7%	50.0%	30.8%
We lack sufficient food preparation skills to cook with fresh, raw produce in-house.	40.7%	44.4%	3.7%	7.4%	3.7%
We lack kitchen equipment to prepare recipes with fresh, raw produce in-house.	33.3%	44.4%	11.1%	7.4%	3.7%
We lack sufficient cooler space to store fresh produce.	22.2%	29.6%	18.5%	22.2%	7.4%
We lack information on how to incorporate locally grown produce into our menu.	11.5%	50.0%	11.5%	23.1%	3.9%
The lack of an organized ordering/ delivery system limits my ability to use locally grown produce.	0.0%	15.4%	23.1%	38.5%	23.1%
Locally grown produce is too expensive.	0.0%	11.5%	34.6%	42.3%	11.5%
Ordering from individual farmers is inconvenient.	0.0%	3.9%	26.9%	34.6%	34.6%
Locally grown produce requires too much time to manage the process.	0.0%	8.7%	34.8%	39.1%	17.4%

Outcomes

As a result of this project significant interest in incorporating locally grown foods into food service programs in NWA institutional facilities including schools, hospitals, nursing homes and child care centers was recognized. Primary institutional barriers to using local foods included lack of a produce ordering system, not knowing how to connect with growers, and concerns with local product price (Fig. 1).

In the F2S pilot, FFM Co-op won the primary bid for five crops and made 14 deliveries to FPS in 2016. Sales were less than expected due to communication and language barriers with the growers learning the ordering and delivery system, and difficulties predicting crop availability. In 2017, a collective bid for regular orders was not placed, however FFM Co-op producers sold to the school enough eggplant, peppers and tomatoes to process 1100 lbs of ratatouille for use in Meatless Monday's vegetarian lasagna.

The FPS equipped kitchens to increase the capacity for district wide purchasing by training kitchen staff, purchasing kitchen processing equipment and developing nine USDA approved recipes featuring local produce. They also promoted their local foods menu items and growers to students and parents through their Harvest of the Month program and social media.

The Advisory board met bi-annually to provide input to improving the project and ideas for advancing the NWA local food system.

Objectives

Objective 1: Identify and address challenges and benefits to an aggregation-distribution system

Objective 2: Identify and address challenges for growers to enter institutional markets with a pilot aggregation-distribution arrangement between the FFM Co-op and FPS.

Objective 3: Address institutional needs in local foods education and foodservice staff support.

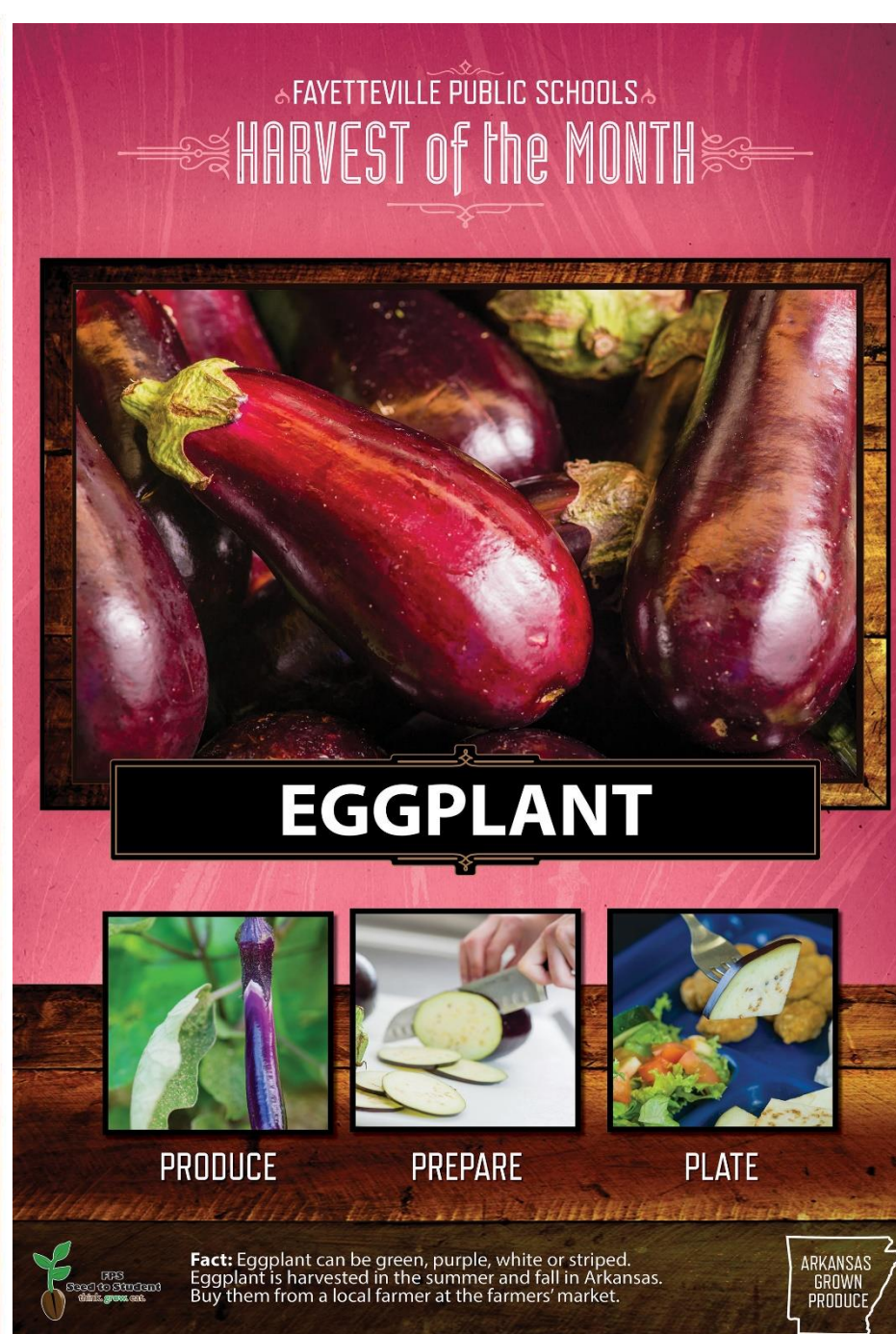
Objective 4: Determine the feasibility of an aggregation-distribution system for NWA through activities and results of above objectives and input of the Advisory Committee.

Activities

- Surveyed institutional markets to assess interest and identify barriers
- Pilot FFM Co-op collective bidding for FPS F2S program
- Won bids for squash, peppers, kale, eggplant, green beans, okra
- Explored additional markets
- Equipped FPS with food processing equipment, Harvest of the Month and FFM Co-op posters
- FPS developed USDA approved school lunch recipes featuring local products
- FPS processed surplus product for school menu
- Met with Advisory board and key stakeholders



FPS 'Farmer Focus' luncheon poster highlighting the FFM Co-op.



FPS 'Harvest of the Month' luncheon poster highlighting eggplant.



FPS lunchroom taste tests for new eggplant recipe. Students vote 'yes' with a green bead if they like the recipe and 'no' with a red one if they don't.



Market manager, Teresa Maurer helping to aggregating produce at the farmers market.



FFM Co-op producer May Lee making a school delivery.

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