

Farm-to-School in New Jersey: The Role of Rutgers Cooperative Extension

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Over the past decade, Farm To School (FTS) initiatives have increased in momentum, powered by their potential to address two challenges facing our society today: concerns about the diet and health of our children and the disappearance of small farms.

Here in New Jersey, interest in FTS is growing rapidly. To respond to these interests, Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE) faculty and staff provide a variety of programs and support to schools and communities who desire to implement FTS.

Cooperative Extension, It's Mission and Goals

RCE, part of the New Jersey Agricultural Experiment Station at Rutgers University, is the New Jersey component of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA). NIFA is an agency within the U.S. Department of Agriculture and administers, among other programs, Cooperative Extension programs in each state.

The mission of RCE is to help the diverse population of New Jersey adapt to a rapidly changing society and improve their lives and communities through an educational process that uses science-based knowledge. Through science-based educational programs, RCE truly enhances the quality of life for residents of New Jersey and brings the wealth of knowledge of the state university to local communities.

Our primary goals are to ensure healthy lifestyles; provide productive futures for youth, adults, and communities; enhance and protect environmental resources; ensure economic growth and agricultural sustainability; and improve food safety and nutrition. RCE has 5 main areas of programmatic thrust:

- Economic Growth and Agricultural Sustainability
- Healthy Lifestyles
- Human and Community Development
- Environment and Natural Resources
- Food Safety and Nutrition

Now...About Farm To School...

RCE brings a unique set of skills and training to the FTS movement. With faculty and staff trained in agriculture, home horticulture, youth development, food/nutrition, health and wellness, we're able to put our diverse skills together to create innovative programs. Take a look at some of the programs we offer:

- ***Seeds to Success: Gloucester County's Youth Farmstand Project:*** *Seeds to Success* is a multi-faceted program that's designed to support local farmers; increase work readiness & life skills in at-risk youth; and build food security and healthier, stronger communities. Since

2003, it has been preparing at-risk youth for the workforce through classroom and on-the-job training.

Seeds to Success teaches special needs youth in 3 Gloucester County communities the skills they need to operate farmstands in their communities. During the summer, students apply this knowledge at our Glassboro, Paulsboro and Woodbury youth farmstands, where students truly experience the many aspects of the day-to-day operations of a retail entrepreneurial enterprise. In addition to the farmstands, *Seeds to Success* mobile farmstands sell produce at all Gloucester County HUD senior housing complexes, some senior centers and even a few County offices (WIC, Veterans' Affairs, etc.) to assure that everyone has the ability to eat healthy with local foods.

The project has four key goals: provide workforce preparation and lifeskills education to teens from our target communities; create retail outlets for NJ farmers; bring affordable, nutritious foods to consumers; and offer service learning and economic development opportunities.

Seeds to Success Youth Farmstands bring new business and affordable, nutritious foods to residents of Glassboro, Paulsboro and Woodbury. The farmstands are a unique example of economic development in at-risk communities. And, they support local farmers by offering three new outlets to sell their crops at competitive, profitable prices. The farmstands accept SNAP (formerly food stamps) and WIC/Senior Farm Market Nutrition Program vouchers, so limited resource residents have a convenient way to redeem their coupons.

All produce sold at *Seeds to Success* Youth Farmstands is purchased from Gloucester and Salem County farmers. None of the produce sold at the farmstands is donated. Throughout July and August, the kids give local farmers three new retail outlets for their crops by selling peaches, tomatoes, peppers, corn, blueberries, greens, herbs and more at the farmstands.

Our goal is to support local agriculture! Agriculture is an important part of the quality of life we enjoy in New Jersey. Productive farmland helps keep property taxes down, benefits the environment, adds to a community's character and ensures that we continue to have access to an abundant supply of locally produced fresh fruits and vegetables. During our 6- to 7-week operating period, *Seeds to Success* purchases an average of \$10,000 - \$15,000 worth of local produce each year.

For more information on *Seeds to Success*, visit our web site at <http://gloucester.njaes.rutgers.edu/fchs/seedstosuccess.html>.

- ***From Our Farms™: Teaching Kids About Food, Nutrition and the Farm:*** Most consumers today are unaware that what they choose to eat affects the environment because their modern lives have little or no connection to the growing of food. In fact, much of the food consumers eat today has little connection to the local environment. By “reconnecting” consumers to the food system, we promote ecological diversity and protect natural resources.

Helping people understand where their food comes from is one way to help them explore food options and incorporate fresh foods into their diets. Incorporating messages about how food grows and where it comes from into nutrition education can be an appealing and marketable way to interest children in nutrition and nutrition education programs. These concepts are the foundation for *From Our Farms*™, a nutrition and agriculture education curriculum developed by RCE and offered through the Department of Family & Community Health Sciences.

From Our Farms is an interactive, activity-based curriculum for children ages 3 to 8. It promotes improved nutrition and consumption of locally grown foods through a series of activities offered through libraries, childcare centers and schools. The educational activities in *From Our Farms* use exploration and adventure to teach children about food, nutrition and the farm. The curriculum also helps prepare children for school by emphasizing math, reading, writing, and cognitive development. *From Our Farms* is a fun way for families and groups to spend time together, learn together and explore together.

To date, more than 6,700 children have participated in *From Our Farms* since its launch in August 2000. Survey responses of parents whose children participated in *From Our Farms* revealed that participation in the program resulted in these behavior changes:

- 75% reported that their child tried a new fruit or vegetable
- 34% prepared/cooked locally grown foods with their children
- 75% learned how fruits/vegetables grow
- 83% learned which fruits/vegetables grow in New Jersey
- 67% planted a garden or fruit/vegetable plants
- 97% visited a farm stand or farm market
- 99% purchased “Jersey Fresh” produce

For more information on *From Our Farms*, visit us on the Web at <http://gloucester.njaes.rutgers.edu/fchs/fromourfarms.html>.

- **The Junior Master Gardener (JMG) Program:** JMG is a new and innovative youth gardening project. It is modeled after the highly popular Master Gardener program, and offers horticulture and environmental science education through fun and creative activities. The JMG program introduces young gardeners to the art and science to gardening, and helps them develop leadership and life skills to become good citizens within their communities, schools and families.

The JMG program in Gloucester County is geared towards home-schooled youth. The group meets on twice a month on Thursday mornings from 10:00 am to noon. This is a small fee associated with this program.

During the last session of JMG the group took a trip to the Gloucester County landfill, made holiday goody bags for the Boys & Girls Club of Gloucester County and completed a number of community service projects, including weeding and planting new flowers at the American Veteran’s building in Sewell, Gloucester County.

For more information on Junior Master Gardeners, visit us on the Web at
<http://gloucester.njaes.rutgers.edu/garden/junior.html>