

Farm-to-School

Expanding Our Organic Reach: How to Make it Happen!

by Maria Noël Groves, NOFA-NH Newsletter Editor

It started with a simple task: Make the apple on your teacher's desk (and in the cafeteria) a local one. In 2003, NH Farm to School Program formed with the goal of bringing local apples and cider to schools. Apples were an easy start because orchards abound in New Hampshire (albeit not organic), and the harvest season coincides with the school season. Within just three years, more than half of the state's K-12 schools were purchasing local apples. Nearly a decade later, farm-to-school success stories dot the state, with a wide variety of local farm goods being purchased including greens, squash, winter squash, tomatoes, carrots, beef, fish, pork, honey, maple syrup, and more.

Apples aside, you might be surprised to learn that the majority of the local produce now purchased by school cafeterias is organic, with our farmers and advocates leading the way to bring healthier food to schools, fight childhood obesity, and teach children how to grow and love real food again. If you're a farmer, parent, food service director, or community member who would like to get involved and affect change, read on!

In the national limelight of Jamie Oliver, Michelle Obama, Mario Batali, and the *Lunch Line* documentary, more Americans are paying attention to the abysmal food served up by the National Food Lunch Program. Two key issues drive the movement: alarming childhood obesity (and associated poor nutrition) and the enthusiastic localvore movement. Bringing organic, local food into cafeterias seems like the perfect solution, but it has its challenges. As the area wellness coalitions know, the "how" can seem like an insurmountable obstacle, especially when a school system isn't interested. Even if you have a passionate food service director on your side, it can be difficult for strapped schools to find and order from a variety of farms and design recipes that kids will eat. Many cafeterias aren't even equipped to properly process fresh produce, and sporadic farm deliveries pose a challenge for directors required to plan meals weeks in advance.

NH Farm to School Program Coordinator Stacey Purslow helps connect the farmers with the schools directly and makes sure that www.nhfarmtoschool.org is loaded with useful information to help everyone get the ball rolling. Up in North Conway, the NH Institute of Agriculture and Forestry (www.nhiaf.org) is starting a distribution program to help get certified organic, local produce into school systems efficiently.

Agriculture as Education

For many parents and educators, connecting kids with local food doesn't just take place in the cafeteria. School gardens and educational visits and activities with local farmers offer children of all ages the opportunity to learn how food is grown. Interested educators might hesitate because standardized testing and requirements for No Child Left Behind leave little room for extra activities. "We help teachers understand how to integrate the curriculum and the garden. My mantra is that there's nothing you can't teach in the garden," says Ruth Smith, State Coordinator of NH Agriculture in the Classroom. Whether it's reading or math, physics or chemistry, history or home ec, these subjects can easily be integrated for real-life learning. Examples include the NH 4-H Common Ground Project teaching garden at the Massabesic Audubon Center in Auburn, the natural landscaping techniques at the Peter Woodbury School Community Schoolyard, and the new organic garden being planted in the Exeter School District. Though not all such gardens are certified, almost all are organic because of the concerns of exposing children to pesticides.

How To Make it Happen: Keys to Success

Enthusiasm: To bring local food into cafeterias, "You have to start with the food service director wanting to spend the extra time," says Purslow. Many directors understand the importance for children and are happy to take part. However,

buying from local farms often takes a tremendous amount of time, of which directors usually have little. In the Exeter School District, parent volunteer Alexis Simpson works directly with farms to find out what's available so that the director, Jeanne Pierce, can place orders easily. Without that help, Pierce says it wouldn't have been possible. "Directors need to be open to the parents who have something to offer. When the goal is for the betterment of the children, we all win. Do not be afraid to try; you will be surprised with the results," says Pierce.

Flexibility & Patience: Start with a simple goal like getting lettuce or carrots from one local farm, then grow from there. Understand that farm schedules and the growing season can affect availability. Purslow recommends that directors be more general when developing meal plans to allow for season variability. For example, "mixed vegetables" rather than "carrots." Open communication between farmers and directors helps tremendously.

Reliability: The most successful farm-to-school connections take place when farmers are able to communicate regularly about what crops will be available and set up reliable deliveries to schools. Creative solutions include enlisting a trustworthy volunteer, intern, or parent and allowing the school to purchase CSA shares.

Staff Training & Great Recipes: Working with fresh, seasonal produce may require new training and equipment for cafeteria staff. Localvore chefs can come into schools to teach delicious, easy recipes. For example, the Concord Cooperative Market's Celery Stick Café chefs will travel to area schools to share recipes and prep techniques. School Nutrition Association conferences (www.snanh.org) serve as inspiration, networking, and learning opportunities. Pierce obtained a Robot Coupe food processor to lighten the prepwork and turn local root vegetables into roasted delights.

Community Involvement: "It is important to recognize the skills of each community member and to build on those skills," says Simpson. High school environmental clubs, community wellness groups, UNH Cooperative Extension, local gardeners, and parents often want to help with school gardens and farm connections.

Resources

NH Farm to School offers nearly every tool you need to bring local food into schools! Lists of interested farms, success stories, articles, recipes, events, and more. www.nhfarmtoschool.org 603-862-4088

NH Farm to School Conferences offer farmers, directors, teachers, parents, chefs, and the community a chance to network, get inspired, and learn new ideas. The next one is on November 19 at Lebanon High School. Call 603-862-4088 to learn more.

Upper Valley Farm to School offers similar resources geared towards the NH/VT border. www.uvfts.org 802-478.-129

NH Agriculture in the Classroom assists teachers in integrating farm and garden programs into curriculum and setting up school gardens www.nhagintheclass.org 603-224-1934