

TOPIC: HOW ARE YOUTH FARMERS' MARKETS HELPING ELIMINATE 'FOOD DESERTS'?



Photograph by Judy Elliot

With 50+ Denver Public Schools campuses now housing school gardens, a produce stand was sure to follow.

Youth Farmers' Markets (YFM) are springing up at schools around Denver, including the Sun Valley region and a bushel-full of other schools in "food deserts," areas without easy access to supermarkets or fresh food. The farmers' markets give these communities greater access to fresh produce, and they give kids access to additional practical educational opportunities related to the gardens.

The Youth Farmers' Market is a collaborative between Denver Urban Gardens, Slow Food Denver and Denver Youth Farmer's Market Coalition. Cooking Matters, another partner, provides nutrition and cooking instruction via informational booths at the markets. The YFM grew from grassroots efforts at several schools and the collaborative effort between Slow Food Denver and Denver Urban Gardens. And the movement is not inconsequential. Last year, in an eight-week operating season running through September and October, DPS's YFMs moved 10,000 pounds of produce from school gardens and CO farms into the school communities.

"This community has one corner store. Most folks have big families but don't have a car. The garden is meant to be a multicultural experience for the community, helping the concept of a holistic and healthy community to grow."

-Maureen Hearty
Denver Urban Gardens Program Facilitator

Fairview YFM Is a Pioneer in the Movement. How Did You Get Started?

The Fairview YFM, in the West Denver community of Sun Valley, is in its sixth year of operation, delivering fresh produce to a community of 1500 families with an average household income below \$12,000/year.

"In the classroom, the kids were learning about farming, sustainability, locality and its impacts on the environment and individual health," said Maureen Hearty, Denver Urban Gardens Program Facilitator. "From there, the students wanted to figure out how to purchase the foods that they were learning about and uphold the values of eating local. The garden project grew from there, with training in gardening and micro-business strategies like managing funds and profit and loss. "



How Is YFM Funded? What Happens With Profits?

Fairview started with grants from several sources, including COPAN (Colorado Physical Activity and Nutrition) a project of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, PPS (Project for Public Spaces), LiveWell Colorado, and CU Health Sciences Center with support from the Integrated Nutrition Education Program.

However, the district-wide YFM movement started four years ago on a shoestring budget: a one year grant from the CO Department of Agriculture and volunteer guidance from Denver Urban Gardens and Slow Food Denver. This year, the Denver YFM Coalition received a new grant for the specific goal of expanding the program into more “food deserts.” This grant funding also provides market research to help YFMs eliminate barriers to market success. For example, free produce vouchers were handed out to community members to encourage visitation to the YFMs on school grounds.

Price setting is up to each individual market. Host schools keep track of income, pounds sold and the number of customers to report to the CO Department of Agriculture, and profits are plowed, so to speak, back into the garden program.



Photograph by Judy Elliot

What Are the Educational Goals of YFM?

YFM provides a cross-curricular educational opportunity for students. YFM give students hands-on experience setting up and running the market and handling money. “No calculators are allowed at some schools,” said Andrew Nowak of Slow Food Denver, who is a trained chef, with a PhD in psychology and an avid gardener. “This helps kids practice their addition and subtraction skills and starts building basic financial literacy.”

At Fairview, food writer Kim Stewart leads monthly lessons on cooking and nutrition. With her help, Fairview is assembling a YFM cookbook, which gives kids an opportunity to share what they are learning.

“Additionally, youth gain important experience working as active team members who learn to celebrate the strengths of diversity showcased in the many cultures of their community. The lessons learned stress tolerance, respect and incorporating the ways in which

leadership skills can impact future decisions in their lives”, said Judy Elliot, the Education Coordinator for Denver Urban Gardens.

How Does the Community Get Involved?

In Sun Valley, a project that started with a few kids planting seeds has blossomed into a community affair. “We now have an Intergenerational Volunteer program run through Denver Urban Gardens and CU Health Foundation,” said Judy. “This has been great for providing multicultural lessons and mentorship opportunities for the kids. Healthy communities are not healthy if there are not safe forums for all aspects of the community.” As part of the ‘employment application’ filled out by potential youth farmers’ market workers, parents agree to help maintain the garden and/or spend hours working at the market. This opportunity for adults to contribute has blossomed into parents using seasonal garden produce to prepare healthy market dishes.

Fairview also throws a Harvest Festival

each October, which brings in students, parents and various groups promoting healthy living. "We have a whole array of arts and crafts and activities that speak to different cultures to get them moving and active and healthy," said Judy. "And this gives us a chance to get people excited and involved so that we can keep this thing going! At the school, we want to support rather than manage projects in order that the community can eventually take over."



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Where Does the Produce Come From?

While the YFM is in part an opportunity for kids to market the produce they grow, the markets frequently offer fruits and vegetables, both organic and conventional, from Colorado farms as well. School garden leaders, typically parents, place orders for fresh produce at wholesale prices. Andrew consolidates the orders and handles the funds, and a delivery service organized by Slow Food Denver and funded by the CO Department of Agriculture and Denver Urban Gardens houses the deliveries in a central cooler for sorting and pickup by the YFM volunteers.

What Can Propel YFM to the Next Level?

In Sun Valley, a garden stakeholders group has formed to shore up resources and engage different community groups in supporting the garden and the goal of growing a healthier community. With support from DPS Wellness Office,

Fairview Elementary School has recently decided to begin the process of instituting a school – wide Wellness team. And that involvement is critical because ultimately, the marketplace measures the success of YFM. YFM is creating an oasis of fresh food in communities across Denver, but it is the communities, through their involvement and support, that decide whether the programs flourish.

The Fairview Youth Farmer's Market has EBT access, which creates more opportunity for low-income families to purchase local produce using food stamps. Increasing EBT opportunities at more markets will help propel YFM to the next level by changing the culture of food stamp spending at corner markets with over priced produce if any is sold there at all. ■

Learn More Partner Organizations:

Denver Urban Gardens
<http://dug.org/>

Slow Food Denver
www.slowfooddenver.org

Cooking Matters
<http://cookingmatters.org/cooking-matters-colorado/>

Partner Farms:

Berry Patch Farms
<http://www.berrypatchfarms.com/>

Ela Family Farms
<http://www.elafamilyfarms.com/>

Forté Farm
<http://fortefarmsinc.com>

Palombos Farms
<http://www.palombomarket.com/>

Sakata Farms (303) 659-1559 (no website)

Vital Food Farms
<http://nice-world.smogworks.com/content/vital-foods-farms>

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