



Growing & Nourishing Healthy Communities

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EXTENDING KNOWLEDGE *Providing Solutions*

Relevance

In Cameron, Hidalgo, and Starr Counties, the prevalence of poverty is higher than the state or national averages – nearly 35%. More than 400,000 individuals receive benefits from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), formerly known as the food stamp program.

Low income individuals and families often have diets that are less nutritious compared to those with higher incomes. Although SNAP can help increase one's ability to purchase healthy foods, those healthy foods have to be within reach. In these three counties, more than 1 out of 4 residents reside in a food desert, defined as a community where healthy foods are high in cost and limited in availability.

Response

The *Growing and Nourishing Healthy Communities* program aims to increase the availability of healthy foods, specifically fresh produce, through the use of community gardens. Funded by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the *Growing and*

Nourishing Healthy Communities program teaches participants how to grow their own produce. To participate in the program, individuals must (1) qualify for SNAP benefits; (2) have an interest in learning how to grow vegetables; (3) agree to help build and maintain the community gardens; and (4) complete a series of educational classes to increase their gardening skills.

Results

In 2014, a total of 212 families enrolled in the program, constructed 18 community gardens, and grew more than 2,900 pounds of vegetables with support from Extension educators and Master Gardeners. Locations of the gardens varied but were in areas accessible to the participants. Extension educators taught the gardening class series, which included topics such as how to select the right garden location, planting and watering techniques, controlling insects, and composting. As produce was harvested, participants learned how to prepare it by participating in the *Better Living for Texans* program. Pre- and post-surveys indicate participants had an increase in gardening knowledge, as well as an increase in the availability of vegetables and fruits in the home.

Comments

“When you do not have the vegetables you need in your home, you step outside and see what you can harvest. It helps me a lot to have the plants.” – *Port Isabel Community Garden Client*

“It brings together the kids, it brings us together.” – *Port Isabel Community Garden Client*

“Can I have thirds, please”? – *Santa Rosa Community Garden Child from BLT Cooking Demonstration*



“Working on my garden here takes me back to my days as a child in Mexico. My father would take all of us kids to the garden to help grow and harvest vegetables for the family table. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to revisit my childhood and relive the pleasant memories.”

– *Lantana Community Garden Client*

“One of our participants from the Alamo Community Garden recently had an ‘aha’ moment while working with us in the garden. I had been calling kale by its Spanish name of *col rizada* when all of a sudden she stated, ‘*Esto es ka-le!*’ (*Ka-le* is the Spanish pronunciation for kale.)

Then she added in Spanish, ‘I have been buying *ka-le* at the store for quite some time and have enjoyed cooking it for my family. Now I am actually growing it here and did not realize it! I feel so blessed to have this great vegetable right here in my own garden!’ This was quite a revelation for her, and I felt so happy for her.” – *Hidalgo County Extension Educator*



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