



Growing a Healthy Food  
System in Southern Arizona



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A Preliminary Report produced by the Community Food Resource Center of the Community Food Bank

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Photographs by Eric Hoffman, except page 4 (Josh Schachter) and page 5 (Amber Herman)



## Introduction

Where does our food come from? How does food get from farms to our plates? Who can afford food and who must struggle to put food on the table; and why? Is the food we eat good for our bodies, our community, and our environment? These are questions that too often do not get asked. With busy schedules and a lack of easily available information, we often do not give our food much thought. Asking questions is the first step toward learning about food and agriculture and finding solutions to the problems of hunger and unequal access to healthy food that face our community.

The questions we ask determine the solutions we find. If a problem such as hunger is viewed as an individual's inability to feed him or herself, a solution is to give the person food. If hunger is viewed as a community issue, from which many people suffer and which harms the health and economic well-being of the general public, we can search for community solutions. One solution is to increase the connections between people with less access to healthy food and a sustainable food system. Increasing these connections increases access for all people in our community to healthy food while improving our local economy and environment.

The stories that follow reflect two central themes. The first theme, Government and Community Responses to Hunger reviews government nutrition programs (help for people with less access and the community at large) and community programs to increase access to healthy, fresh food. The second theme reviews the Sustainable Local Food System that serves all people living in the area. Stories illustrate the connections between hunger and food production. Sustainable urban and rural food production is being used to increase healthy food access for all. Who can and who cannot afford to buy healthy food is determined by how our food is grown, distributed, and purchased.

The stories of the two themes are written to help raise awareness about food access and encourage community members to ask questions about our food system. The stories demonstrate real-life problems and real-life solutions that are being implemented throughout Southern Arizona.



## *Government & Community Responses to Hunger*

Hunger is a reality for many living in Arizona. More than 2 million people, about 12% of the state's total population, are unable to provide enough nutritious food for themselves and their families. It is estimated that 50,000 children in Southern Arizona are at risk of hunger. Numerous government and community programs are working to alleviate hunger so that all Arizonans have sufficient food, but a gap remains that is preventing everyone from having equal access to enough nutritious food to have healthy lives. Work to close the gap is described throughout the stories.

### *Food Stamps/SNAP*

The Food Stamp program, recently renamed the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is one of the government's largest and most important safety nets for preventing hunger throughout the country. More than 26 million people benefit from the program nation-wide, with about 700,000 participants in Arizona. SNAP is a federal entitlement program, meaning everyone who is eligible for the program has a legal right to the services. However, only 56% of people who are eligible for SNAP in Arizona participate in the program. Over half a million people in Arizona that are eligible are not receiving benefits that could substantially improve their health and nutrition.

SNAP is critical for individuals and families and is an important economic contributor to communities. Providing community members with dollars to spend on food helps stimulate the local economy. Every five dollars in SNAP purchases generates \$9.20 in community spending. For every \$1 billion spent on food by SNAP recipients, 3,300 farm jobs are created. With over \$34 billion in SNAP benefits provided in 2008 nationwide, it is a significant source of spending and job creation.

"SNAP is a bridge to employment and self-sufficiency," explains Marco Liu, Program Administrator for SNAP in Arizona. By providing support, SNAP can help relieve other economic stressors while people work to provide for themselves and their families.

The average SNAP participant in Arizona receives \$101.43 per month. While SNAP may not cover the cost of all food expenses, it has helped many people throughout the community regularly put more food on the table. "You don't get that much money from food stamps," SNAP participant Judy Fuller explains. "If you shop wisely, food stamps can really go a long way." By buying in bulk, shopping at discount stores, and following sale items in the weekly paper closely, Judy is able to feed herself and stock up for the next month to help save on future food costs. "I don't know what I would do without food stamps," Judy explains, "It helps tremendously." Judy also started a garden in her yard so she can grow some of her own food.



### *WIC*

The Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC), a federally funded health and nutrition program, provides nutritious food, nutrition education, and health care referrals to low-income pregnant, postpartum and breastfeeding women, and infants and children up to age 5 who are at

### **Other Government Nutrition Programs in AZ**

#### **TEFAP FOOD BOX**

TEFAP is a federal program that helps supplement diets by providing individuals and families with low incomes with emergency food and nutrition assistance at no cost.

#### **FOOD PLUS**

Food Plus is a food assistance program that provides children ages 1-6, post partum mothers, pregnant mothers and senior citizens ages 60 and older with a monthly package of food.

#### **NATIONAL SCHOOL LUNCH & BREAKFAST PROGRAM**

The National School Lunch Program & School Breakfast program are federal programs operating in public and nonprofit private schools and residential child care institutions. They provide nutritionally balanced, low-cost or free lunches and breakfasts to children each school day.

nutritional risk.

An average of \$75 a month is given to each WIC participant in Pima County, an important source of healthy food for many women and children, especially since much of family income goes to rent, day care, clothes, diapers, transportation, and other fixed expenses. Raquel Morales receives WIC to help her 3-year old daughter. She explains, "WIC gives me one pound of beans, one pound of rice, canned green beans, and bread. They give a lot of stuff and everything helps." Cereal, formula, fruit, tuna and peanut butter are some other foods also included in the food package, depending on the age and nutritional requirements of the children. "If I didn't have WIC," Raquel explains, "milk would be too expensive."

### *Farm to School*

Only 21 percent of children eat the recommended nine or more servings of fruits and vegetables per day (nearly half of all vegetable servings eaten by children are fried potatoes), a diet that significantly increases their risk of obesity, diabetes, and other chronic diseases. In an attempt to increase healthy fruit and vegetable consumption, the Litchfield Elementary School District, west of Phoenix, began a Farm to School program, purchasing much of the food it serves in cafeterias from local farms.

David Schwake, Food Director for Litchfield schools, noticed that some of the produce he bought was grown in Arizona, shipped to Los Angeles, then purchased and shipped back by a local vendor to be sold in Arizona. He also noticed many farms growing food in the fields surrounding the schools. David says, "It was a no-brainer" to start buying directly from the farmers. "Eighty-five percent of the time, the price is cheaper than buying from the regular vendor," he explains.

At the fifteen Litchfield schools, there is a salad bar every day complete with all the fruits and vegetables you can think of, provided mostly by local growers. Every day 6,000 lunches and over 3,000 breakfasts and snacks are served. "Not only is it fresher and healthier for the kids," David Schwake explains, "but it costs less, gives something back to the local farms and creates local jobs. It is a smidgen more work when buying local stuff. You have to wipe the dirt off the food," David concludes, but "the benefits of buying locally far outweigh any challenges."



### *Gleaning*

Gleaning is the historic tradition of inviting people onto your land to harvest excess food rather than letting it waste in the field. Many people don't realize that they are growing healthy food right in their backyard, such as citrus, pomegranates, figs, or native mesquite trees. Desert Harvesters, a Tucson non-profit group, use a hammermill to grind mesquite pods into nutritious flour. Currently, more than 400 people per year have their pods milled into mesquite flour, helping to provide a source of free, nutritious food for families and a source of extra income for some who sell their surplus flour to friends and neighbors.

Milling mesquite pods has opened a new world of local food to many people. "It's quite an interesting experience for most people this day and age who are so disconnected from their food and how it is grown," Desert Harvester volunteer Dana Helfer explains. "When people start to look closer to home for food sources, there is a mind shift that people are making, helping them to see an abundance of resources that they may not have seen otherwise. Making the choice to actively participate in the procurement and the securing of your own food source is an empowering thing. There is a security that comes from knowing that even if I don't have the money to buy everything, I could go out and harvest some of it right out in the desert. It brings a tremendous sense of freedom. No longer are you dependent on others to provide for your nutrition."

Another community group harvesting local food is the Ishkash\*taa Refugee Harvesting Network.

Over 50 people who have moved to Tucson from refugee camps from around world harvest around 40 different local foods for a total of 30,000 pounds of produce a year. Home owners can call Ishkash\*taa to harvest the food from their yards year-round. Most of the food goes to the refugee families and some is donated or sold at farmers' markets. "The emphasis is to empower the refugees," explains Barbara Esworth, founder and director of the group. "They are giving as well as receiving. It's not a food hand out because they are lending a hand and helping. They are helping their families, their neighborhoods, and getting to see the city and meet people."

## *Sustainable Local Food System*

The local food system in Southern Arizona is small and growing. For many communities, healthy and nutritious food is not accessible. The term "food desert" is used to describe an area where access to healthy food is severely limited or inaccessible. Catalina, a small community north of Tucson, fits the definition of a food desert. "There is no place to get fresh produce here," explains Luz, a resident of Catalina. "I go to Tucson to shop at Food City. There is a Bashas' but it's too expensive," she explains, "It takes 45 minutes to drive to Tucson, depending on traffic. My vegetables don't stay fresh long so I have to go once a week."

To increase access for everyone, people throughout the community are using environmentally and economically sustainable methods to grow and distribute healthy, chemical-free, and locally grown food.

## *Native Seed/SEARCH*

"You can't have sustainable agriculture and sustainable food security without sustainable resources. Seeds are the building blocks of sustainable food," explains Bryn Jones, Executive Director of Native Seed/SEARCH. With the help of Native people throughout the region and a 60-acre farm in Patagonia, the organization has collected over 1,800 varieties of seeds from plants that may have otherwise disappeared forever. "The seed, the food, and the culture are so intertwined. If you lose one, you lose the others," Bryn states. All farming used to be based on seed saving, but as our food system became global and with the hybridization of seeds, this practice has all but disappeared. Bryn explains that by saving seeds we are saying: "We're not going to let you take this control from us. We are going to be a part of this sustainable future by ensuring that these things are readily available to anyone who wants to grow them."

## *Sustainable Agriculture*

Many farmers in the area are using environmentally sustainable methods to grow crops. The stories of three farms are told, each of varying size and technique. The farmers share a common understanding of the necessity of sustainable agriculture in building a healthy local food system.

### *Forever Yong Farm*

John Reub grew up in the Chicago area on a small farm where he gained a love of farming. Twelve years ago, he and his wife, Yong, decided to move to Arizona to be with family and to start a career in farming. Together, they started Forever Yong Farm on 20-acres in Amado, an hour south of Tucson. They manage the farm with help from their two sons.

Forever Yong Farm is managed organically, using only natural, chemical-free methods to control pests and weeds. "I usually don't need to do anything since the ecosystem is so well-balanced with all the species living here. Let's say I have aphids,



what I'll find is not too long afterwards there will be a good population of ladybugs over there to scarf up all the aphids. Many times outbreaks of pests don't get out of hand because there is such a good balance." John believes we have to change the way we farm. "We can't just keep externalizing our costs into the environment," he explains. "We are just shooting ourselves in the foot."

"Not only are we in the Sonora Desert," he explains, "we are also in a food desert, too – the local food system is not very developed." The reason is there are not enough local growers to meet demand. "It certainly is possible that we could develop our local food system because there is the demand and it's just a matter of people stepping up. I think governments have to play a role in making it easier for people to farm, more economic incentives."

### Crooked Sky Farms

Frank Martin, a child of migrant farm workers, has been working in agriculture all his life. At the age of 9, he started working on a large commercial farm to help his family. Frank knows first-hand the health effects of pesticides. He was not allowed to stop harvesting when the crop-duster flew overhead, even if he needed to throw up because of the chemicals going into his respiratory system. He now suffers from many health problems as a result of his exposure to the toxic chemicals on the farm.

Farmer Frank, as he is known, runs Crooked Sky Farms, a collection of organically-managed plots of land throughout Southern Arizona, with the main operation on 40-acres in Phoenix. With 12 employees, Frank grows produce for over 1,200 weekly CSA members. Frank shares the same farming ethic as the Reubs, as he explains why organic farming does not use chemicals. "You just observe and you do nothing. I think a lot of people try to kill bugs and it's not really the thing to do. I believe that everything runs in a big cycle. When you take a link out of the cycle it falls apart and dies. When you pour a poison on a bug or stomp on it with your foot it's still the same, you are breaking a cycle."



"Stores are proud of selling things that are Arizona grown. If they have things that are grown here, they are going to market it," Frank states. Farmer Frank believes that there is potential for the local food system to grow, and that Arizona is the ideal place. "The general climate here is outstanding in terms of being able to grow things." A major obstacle, he believes, is that not enough people are becoming farmers. To assist young farmers, he has donated rows on his land to encourage young people to start farming. With a yearlong growing season, Arizona has the potential to create a sustainable local food system that can provide healthy, organically grown produce to all communities at all times.

### Marana Farm

In 2007, the Community Food Bank started the Marana Farm, a partnership with the City of Marana Parks and Recreation Department. The farm helps to build the local food system by introducing more people to agriculture. "The Food Bank wants to grow more farmers, and more produce," Cie'na Schlaefli, manager of the Marana Farm, explains. Future farmers are invited to grow a few rows of their own crops to experiment and learn. "You need to plant, grow, weed, and nourish something you take on as your own. That's the best way to learn."

Recently, the Marana Farm increased educational programming with the development of a Kids' Farm. On 1/3-acre, kids from surrounding schools visit the farm to design, plant, harvest, and eat food they grow. A pizza garden grows wheat, tomatoes, garlic, basil, and other vegetables so kids can grow and see the food that goes into a pizza, then bake their pizza in a cob oven. A farm apprenticeship program also teaches kids about food production and food systems.

"We are trying to connect people back to the land, the food, and where it comes from," Cie'na con-

cludes. "Food doesn't come from the grocery store, it comes from the earth. That's the major point of it, trying to get more people back to the farm and educating. If more people knew what it took to grow a tomato, to grow that pea, they wouldn't take it for granted."

### *Tucson CSA*

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a partnership between a local farmer and community members who own "shares" in a farm, paying in advance for a season's crops. Members pay at the beginning of the season, minimizing the risk for farmers, and sharing the results of the farmers' labor. Farmers are able to focus on producing, rather than marketing, and provide a weekly source of local fresh vegetables to members. Tucson CSA was started in 2004 with 15 members and has grown to 500 with a waiting list of over 300 people. For \$19 per week, members receive fresh produce throughout the season. "It's an insurance that you are going to eat well," explains Tucson CSA employee Sara Jones. "The human interactions," at weekly pick-ups, Sara continues, "help people to realize that what they are eating affects people. We have to eat differently than we are used to." The rise in popularity of the CSA reflects the increased interest in local and organic food throughout Southern Arizona.

### *Community & Economic Development*

If people cannot afford the food being grown locally, farmers cannot continue to farm. The Downtown Phoenix Public Market is a place for local people to sell produce, baked goods, crafts, and music. With 75 weekly vendors, the Market generates more than \$1 million per year in sales. "The point is to provide an overhead forum for producers and for customers to come and eat well, increase production, increase income, increase distribution," explains Cindy Gentry, Director of Community Food Connections, which runs the market. "We're creating jobs and supporting other kinds of micro-business development." About 60% of the businesses are women or minority owned and 40% of the owners are low-income when they begin selling at the market. Four vendors have been able to start their own shops after getting their start at the market.



### *School Garden*

"First you put the seed in, then the root grows, and then the root sprouts into a thing," says a first grader digging a plant bed in the Borton Primary Magnet School garden. On school land, with a grant from the Western Growers Association, a teacher, Molly Reid, and her students started a garden with plant beds, a chicken coop, and a compost pile. What used to be an empty plot of land has turned into a source of fresh, chemical-free produce grown and eaten by the elementary school children.

The Borton Primary Magnet School garden is intended to grow fruits and vegetables, as well as future healthy eaters. Molly's aspiration is for the kids to grow up with an understanding of where food comes from "so they won't be shocked to learn about it like their parents," she explains. Children are also teaching their parents how to grow food by leading student-run workshops for adults. Some parents have started gardens at home at the request of their children.



The school garden provides food for use in the cafeteria and for students to sell at a mini-farmers' market where families can purchase the produce. Food scraps from the cafeteria go back to the garden's compost pile and chicken coop. The incorporation of the garden into the classroom curriculum and their hands-on time in the soil teaches the children where their food comes from, the hard work necessary to grow food, and the unparalleled joy of eating a fruit or vegetable that you planted, harvested, and prepared yourself.



## *Home Gardening*

Home gardening is providing many people the opportunity to grow some of their own food. Gary Skinner moved from Pennsylvania to Tucson for medical reasons. An avid gardener back east, he learned of the gardening programs offered at the Community Food Bank. Despite being blind and having breathing problems, Gary decided to give it a try and start gardening in a new environment and climate. With compost and seeds from the Food Bank and help with labor, Gary quickly grew a flourishing garden in his backyard patch. "I was getting 3 pounds of snow peas a week, plus what we ate," Gary explains. "We would sell them at the farmers' market and then we got the money for it, which helped me to buy all the seeds that I planted my garden with this year." Plus, he continues, "It gives us something extra that we don't have to buy. You take a pound of organic snow peas, \$4 a pound at the store? We had those for about four months. You add that all up and it definitely saves us some bucks."

The benefits of gardening are not just monetary. "Fresh stuff is so much different and the taste is totally different, too. It's got to be better for you if it tastes that much better! Plus, gardening is good exercise." He also describes the security that comes with growing your own food. "When you garden," Gary says, "you know exactly what's in your food."

Gardening, Gary believes, "can be beneficial to everyone. The thing is everybody has a little place. Even if they grew some of their own lettuce it would mean substantial assistance for everyone. You wouldn't have to import it! Anything people can grow, even if they took it to consignment," Gary continues, "would benefit our environment. And in the end, it can be beneficial to your health, too." The Skinner garden has inspired others in his neighborhood to start growing their own food. The man next door and a woman down the street have both started gardening after seeing Gary's success and passion for home-grown food.

Gardening has played a crucial role in helping the Skinner family to build their own food security. "We used food boxes once. I was real sick and it cost us a lot to go into the hospital. With my costs for the hospital we didn't have a lot for food and we got a food box. It made a big difference at the time. But now, as my garden grows, we haven't ever needed an emergency box since then. I'm hoping I can always grow enough stuff that I can maintain. It's helped us a lot so far."



## Conclusion

The stories told here are examples of the work underway in Southern Arizona to ensure that everyone has access to healthy food at all times. Many other stories can be told about people who are working through government and community organizations to increase access and build a sustainable local food system that provides healthy food for everyone.

There is more work to be done to build a local food system. As the stories describe, many people have created and acted on opportunities to improve the lives of everyone living in Tucson and the surrounding area.

Policy recommendations can be made from the shared stories:

- Increase outreach for SNAP to ensure everyone who is qualified receives service
- Develop economic incentives for grocery stores and farmers' markets to open in under-served locations
- Encourage school districts to purchase from local farms
- Develop economic incentives for new farmers
- Support school gardens and the incorporation of gardening into science and humanities curriculums

Changing how our food is grown and distributed cannot happen until we start asking questions and engaging each other in conversation about the importance of food, where it comes from, and equal access for all. Telling the stories is a starting point. The stories are inspiring and provide the bases for discovering the challenges and the need for change. Working together we can ensure that all people have access to healthy, fresh food; the time is ripe for change.

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