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Using Agriculture as the Foundation for an Extension Nutrition Education Program

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Using Agriculture as the Foundation for an Extension Nutrition Education Program

Abstract

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is based on the principle that the future success of our farms is dependent upon the relationships between farmers and an expanding non-agricultural population. And, in many ways, the future success of our communities can be cultivated by strengthening our connection with our agricultural roots. Building on this concept, Rutgers Cooperative Extension created a nutrition and agriculture education initiative for children ages 3 to 8 called "From Our Farms." From Our Farms promotes improved nutrition and consumption of locally grown foods through a series of family-based activities that are offered through local libraries.

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Introduction

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is based on the principle that the future success of our farms is dependent upon the relationships between farmers and an expanding non-agricultural population. And, in many ways, the future success of our communities can be cultivated by strengthening our connection with our agricultural roots. Building on this concept of community (linking farmers with consumers), Rutgers Cooperative Extension (RCE) created a nutrition and agriculture education initiative for children ages 3 to 8 called "From Our Farms." From Our Farms promotes improved nutrition and consumption of locally grown foods (which will, in turn, sustain the economic viability of local farms) through a series of family-based activities that are offered through local libraries.

What Is CSA and How Does It Work?

CSA farming has been gaining momentum since its introduction in the United States in the mid-1980s. The CSA concept originated in the 1960s in Switzerland and Japan, where consumers interested in safe food and farmers seeking stable markets for crops joined together in economic partnerships. Today, CSA farms in the U.S. number more than 400. Most are located near urban centers in New England, the Mid-Atlantic states, and the Great Lakes region, with growing numbers in other areas, including the West Coast.

A CSA farm is made up of a community of individuals who pledge support to a farm operation so that the farmland becomes, either legally or spiritually, the community's farm. Both growers and consumers provide mutual support and share the risks and benefits of food production. Typically, members or "share-holders" of the farm pledge in advance to cover the anticipated costs of the farm operation and farmer's salary. In return, they receive shares in the farm's bounty throughout the growing season, as well as satisfaction from reconnecting to the land and participating directly in food production.

Bringing the Farm to the People . . . and the People to the Farm

Helping people understand where their food comes from is one way to help them explore food options and incorporate more fresh foods into their diets. This approach to nutrition education can

be a savvy, appealing, and marketable way to interest consumers in nutrition and nutrition education programs.

From Our Farms does not serve as a CSA farm or farm market. Instead, it applies the principles of CSA to teach consumers about food, nutrition and the farm. It involves the community in agriculture (something with which many consumers are not familiar); introduces consumers to locally grown foods and farms; and teaches them why those foods are good for us. The program has four key objectives:

1. Children will learn how to incorporate more fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products into their diets, with emphasis on choosing locally grown foods.
2. Children will try fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products when offered as part of the From Our Farms program or at home.
3. Children will understand the agricultural process (i.e., where foods come from and how they're grown/raised/produced) and appreciate the role of the farmer in providing our food.
4. Children will build new eating skills and behaviors that enable them to select, use, and prepare more fruits, vegetables, and low-fat dairy products.

Project Summary

From Our Farms operates through nine local libraries. It offers parents and children a series of inter-related activities to teach nutrition and agriculture. There are two key components.

From Our Farms Learning Boxes

Children (and their parents) learn about food, nutrition, and the farm with From Our Farms learning boxes, available through libraries. Learning boxes are themed learning kits. They include instructional materials that serve a variety of learning styles, including games, puppets, audio and/or videotapes, puzzles, and farm- and food-focused storybooks. Boxes also include family fun pages and activity sheets, developed by Rutgers Cooperative Extension. Fun pages (textbooks) and activity sheets (workbooks) contain a series of lessons and activities for parents and children to work on at home, in conjunction with the storybooks and other materials in the boxes.

Parents use the boxes with children at home, where they read stories and play games that teach about food, nutrition, and agriculture. Then, they complete a series of lessons and hands-on activities outlined in the fun pages and activity sheets. (They grow vegetables; visit local farm stands and grocery stores; count/sort fruit; taste and compare different varieties of tomatoes; and so forth.)

There are three different learning boxes, vegetables, fruits, and dairy cows. Educational messages for each box emphasize how foods are grown or produced, local farms that grow/raise the commodity, the nutritional value of the commodity and the role it plays in a healthful diet, where to find the commodity, and how to select and prepare the commodity. All messages are kid-focused, with "FYI" tidbits on agriculture and nutrition included for parents.

From Our Farms Family Activity Days

Multiple educational workshops are offered each year to complement the learning boxes. Activity days incorporate hands-on activities to teach children and parents what foods are produced locally; how vegetables, fruit and animal products are grown; and how to select, use, and prepare agricultural products.

In an era when consumers are becoming farther and farther removed from the basics of where their food comes from, From Our Farms' agrarian and back-to-nature appeal has attracted the interest of parents, children, community groups, farmers, and government officials, alike.

Initial Survey Results

An in-depth applied research intervention will be initiated in 2003. An initial follow-up telephone survey of 250 From Our Farms participants revealed that participation in the program resulted in the following behavior changes, based on a response rate of 18% (n=46).

- 88% reported that their child tried a new fruit or vegetable.
- 31% prepared/cooked locally grown foods with their children.
- 79% learned how fruits/vegetables grow.
- 77% learned which fruits/vegetables grow in New Jersey.
- 89% planted a garden or fruit/vegetable plants.
- 98% visited a farm stand or farm market.
- 99% purchased "Jersey Fresh" produce.

For more information on the From Our Farms project, including ordering information, contact the author at the e-mail address above or call 856/307-6450, extension 2.

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