

Establishing a Successful Harvest of the Month

Creative Variations on the Field Tested Program

Harvest of the Month is a multi-component program that works to increase access to, preference for and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables by engaging students in fun and educational ways with local produce. Typically, a single fruit, vegetable or other local product is featured each month of the school year through classroom or cafeteria taste tests, nutrition education activities, family-centered Harvest of the Month (HoM) newsletters, and/or incorporation into school meals alongside promotional materials.

The following features on Brown and Vernon County HoM initiatives highlight the ways that farm to school teams can design HoM activities to fit the unique strengths and needs of their school communities. HoM is not limited to the school, either, as the whole community can benefit from the education about fresh fruits and vegetables. For ideas on how to build HoM into larger community efforts, see the 'Lessons Learned' section on Page 20.

Brown County: Cultivating a Sustainable Harvest of the Month

Having taught over **875 Harvest of the Month (HoM) lessons** to over **3,000 students** in a single year, the Live54218 Farm to School staff in Brown County clearly knows a thing or two about how to build a successful HoM program. Since they have established an initial set of best practices over the last several years, the organization's focus has shifted to reaching students in every school in the county through the implementation of a sustainable growth plan.

A Carefully Crafted Core of Activities

Live54218 is a county-based non-profit focused on healthy living. The organization has implemented carefully planned incremental steps towards building a highly effective and self-sustaining farm to school program. For the last two years, a combination of Live54218 staff, university interns and community volunteers have taught monthly HoM nutrition education lessons to local students. This model has worked well for organically building educator interest in farm to school classroom lessons. Thanks to receptive teachers and students, the program has grown to be so successful that nearly 200 classroom lessons are taught in the county every month.

Another main feature of the Live54218 Farm to School program is monthly cafeteria taste tests of the featured fruit or vegetable HoM item. In order to encourage participation, students are asked to vote on whether or not they enjoyed the flavor of the fruit or vegetable. To further increase familiarity with and exposure to the HoM fruit or vegetable, they are incorporated into either the lunch line menu or salad bar during the month that they are featured.

Making Harvest of the Month Available to the Community

To increase community-wide involvement in the farm to school movement, Live54218 creates a local buzz through ongoing media coverage of HoM and other farm to school activities. The Live54218 Farm to School program has received over 70 media hits since its inception in the fall of 2012, including a farm to school series run by the Green Bay Press Gazette during the 2013/2014 school year.



A young student participating in a Harvest of the Month activity. (Photo: Live54218)

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Brown County: Cultivating a Sustainable Harvest of the Month (continued)

Parents and teachers are further engaged through tailored HoM newsletters:

- Family newsletters are sent home with students who receive HoM classroom lessons and are intended to be shared with their families. These newsletters include recipes, shopping tips, fun facts and interactive activities like word scrambles and jokes.
- Educator newsletters are designed specifically for classroom teachers and include suggestions for how to incorporate the HoM program into the core curriculum. The front side of the newsletter provides background information on the featured fruit or vegetable and the back includes suggested nutrition and agriculture-related activities that teachers can incorporate into the school day.

Planning for Program Sustainability

With the core elements of HoM in place, the Farm to School team is now concentrating on how to extend the reach of the program. They are also working on achieving inter-school program sustainability, for the reach of Live54218, like most non-profits, is limited by funding and personnel capacity.

Gaining teaching support from within the school, rather than relying solely on Live54218 staff and volunteers to lead HoM lessons, would greatly increase the possibility that farm to school programming could reach all the students in Brown County.

Live54218 recently surveyed K-5 teachers at buildings currently receiving HoM lessons, in order to determine their current ability and future willingness to personally lead HoM lessons in their classrooms.



Left to right, clockwise: Placing a vote for the HoM item. Students hard at work on a HoM activity. A group of students show off their beautiful HoM artwork. A classroom participating in HoM nutrition and agriculture education lessons taught by Live54218 staff. (Photos: Live54218)

In addition to teacher receptiveness, the survey also gathered information about what types of resources teachers would need to feel comfortable teaching these lessons in the classroom. An option suggested by Ashley Ponschok, the Live54218 Farm to School Coordinator, is a HoM implementation package consisting of Live54218-led instruction for the first year, followed by bi-monthly Live54218 lessons the next year. The non-profit would provide lesson plans and materials to help teachers lead the lessons themselves in the alternating months. Teachers would have an open and supportive line of communication with Live54218 during this transition. As such, Live54218 could become progressively hands-off with each passing year.

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Brown County: Cultivating a Sustainable Harvest of the Month (continued)



Live 54218 is planning for the future as they build a sustainable farm to school and Harvest of the Month program for the next generation of students to enjoy. (Photo: Live54218)

Planning for Program Sustainability (continued)

Alternatively, survey results may indicate that the majority of teachers are unable to teach HoM lessons, but are still interested in having their students be involved in the program. In this case, Live54218 can quantitatively demonstrate the interest in HoM and cite these figures in grant applications or business sponsorship requests to fund additional educators. The organization is prepared to act on any of the possible survey results, but by taking a metrics-based approach, the organization will be able to make well-informed decisions about how to sustainably grow their HoM program.

In addition, cafeteria taste tests are currently staffed by Live54218 volunteers. While this provides a wonderful connection to the community, the expert involvement of food service staff is necessary for assessing whether fruit and vegetable consumption has increased among students. The Farm to School team is working to gradually incorporate HoM items into the existing cafeteria set-up by holding culinary workshops to teach food service personnel how to process and prepare fresh, local produce for school meals and how to serve HoM samples directly on the lunch lines. Food service staff investment in HoM is crucial, as their willingness and enthusiasm to serve fresh food can impact student eating habits in a very positive way.

Over time and with care, Live54218 aims to transition the majority of their HoM and other farm to school programming into the hands of school personnel. They will continue to provide resources and support while ever-widening the reach of farm to school in the county.

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Vernon County: An Ever-Evolving Recipe for Success



Harvest of the Month (HoM) in Vernon County schools is another shining example of how the gradual expansion of a well-received program can pave the way for large-scale success. The Vernon County Farm to School team began the Harvest of the Month program in 2008 by serving a single school, and are now teaching HoM lessons in all but one of the six elementary schools in the county. In addition, fruit and vegetable taste tests are being offered in every single school.



If you ask Vernon County Farm to School Education Coordinator Kristine De Prato about the secret formula to their success, she will tell you that it lies in building and maintaining the positive reputation of farm to school. Another key element is to help teachers that are excited about the program spread the word from classroom to classroom and school to school. De Prato sums up the “formula” by underscoring the importance of properly training those that teach lessons, and applying the principle of continuous improvement to all programmatic elements.

Increasing Taste Test Participation

However, even the best-crafted programs can and do encounter challenges. The Vernon County Farm to School staff have recently noticed that middle school and high school students are less likely to participate in fruit and vegetable taste tests than elementary age students. In an effort to improve taste test attitudes within this demographic, the farm to school team has partnered with Home Economics and Future Farmers of America teachers to engage the older students. Their plan has been for middle school and high school students in these classes to grow the majority of HoM items in school gardens and greenhouses and then orchestrate the taste tests themselves.



Top to bottom: A Vernon County dairy farmer holds a captive classroom audience. Students participate in a HoM taste test. Young gardeners get their hands in the dirt during a HoM lesson. (Photo: Vernon County Farm to School)

Inclusive Solutions

By providing students with a sense of ownership and pride, older students can embrace the meaning of farm to school, and serve as role models for younger students. This creative solution not only addresses a specific challenge, but also fosters stronger farm to school ties within the district.

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LESSONS LEARNED

Essentials of HoM Educational Activities

- **Who Can Lead:** AmeriCorps members, farm to school coordinators, nutrition educators, college interns, teachers, volunteers
- **What:** See the Resources page for lesson plan suggestions
- **When:** Have teachers sign up based on interest and availability OR schedule monthly lessons
- **Where:** In classrooms, in assemblies, at lunch, recess, after-school programs, summer programs
- **Why:** Increase student nutrition and agriculture knowledge, and encourage increased consumption of fruits and vegetables

Tips for Jump-Starting HoM

- Find an in-school champion to support HoM and stir-up enthusiasm among teachers, administrators and food service staff
- Survey administrators and teachers to determine interest and capacity in HoM lessons
- Work directly with the Food Service Director, he or she may be interested in incorporating the HoM item into the menu to be counted in the nutritional requirements for school meals
- Ease into HoM by purchasing local products offered through your distributor
- Consider modifying HoM newsletters for different schools or school districts, such as offering multiple language options or alternative dissemination methods (e.g. email vs. paper)

Strategies to Involve All Ages: Taste Tests

- Introduce fruits and vegetables through the senses before beginning the taste test: Observe, smell, feel and learn
- Taste test produce grown in school gardens: Increases participation through student pride in and ownership of school-grown produce
 - Prepare fruits and vegetables in appealing and/or familiar ways (e.g. kohlrabi “french fries”- cut in sticks, coat in olive oil and bake in the oven)
 - Organize older students to facilitate taste tests for younger student – make eating fruits and vegetables “cool”
 - Ask students to vote on their preference for the HoM item
 - Run a HoM segment on student-run television or PA newscasts. Include fun facts, Q&A, or a special guest

“All of the students at least tried the kohlrabi (during a taste test), because they were educated about it beforehand, instead of being handed the vegetable and told ‘hey, try this’. They were first taught what it looks like, smells like and how it is grown.”

– Amber LaChappelle (Teacher and School Grant Coordinator at Jefferson Elementary School, Manitowoc Public School District)

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LESSONS LEARNED

A Spread of Successful HoM Activities from Transform WI Communities

School Farmer Visits: Feature a producer presentation, Q&A, taste tests, story time, garden work, etc.

Farm Tours: For teachers, students, administrators and families. For example, Nancy Kellner at Kellner's Back Acre Garden (Manitowoc County) gave tour participants a salsa garden to take home with them: a 5 gallon bucket filled with potting mix and a pepper, onion, tomato and cilantro plant.

Family Harvest of the Month Kick-Off Event: Feature a HoM item, introduce the program to parents, design growing cycle stations, invite farmers to speak, or show an agriculture or nutrition-themed movie.

Harvest Challenge: Feature local foods in a student cooking contest (see Vernon County Farm to School website for a great example).

Chef's Table: Invite a local chef to prepare a school meal that uses local ingredients and fits within the school food service nutrition and financial guidelines (see Vernon County Farm to School website for more information).

Farmers Market: Arrange a field trip for students to purchase Harvest of the Month products on their own at the farmers market.

"We wanted Harvest of the Month to be about more than just tasting... and we didn't want it to stop within the schools, we wanted the students to bring that excitement home."

— Kathleen Haas (Farm to School Coordinator, Columbia County)

Cross-Promoting Harvest of the Month in the Community

Partner with area grocery stores to highlight Harvest of the Month products by including promotional signage over featured items and distributing HoM newsletters near the display. Crawford County grocery stores note that HoM products sell as much as six times better when promoted as a HoM item.

Collaborate with area hospitals to develop and distribute healthy recipe cards featuring Harvest of the Month products.

Team up with the local farmers' market by asking market managers or farmers to feature HoM items and hand out healthy recipe cards.

Facilitate taste tests through other programs in the area, like the Bookmobile.

Distribute HoM newsletters and recipes at area worksites and community organizations.

Provide HoM samples at nutrition kiosks at the hospital, grocery stores, or area events.

Incorporate fun details in HoM newsletters like: a list of where the featured fruit or vegetable can be purchased, interactive activities to engage the family, and engaging fruit and vegetable-themed books for parents and kids to read together.



Hands-on nutrition education lessons led by an AmeriCorp member (Photo: REAP Food Group) 20

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RESOURCES

Program Structure

California HoM website includes lesson plans, newsletter templates, activities, and more:

<http://www.harvestofthemonth.cdph.ca.gov/>

*Be sure to visit the “Training Corner” if it is your first time to the site

“I take their (California HoM) successes and translate them into Wisconsin-based activities, in the hopes that we can see that same success.”

– Ashley Ponschok (Farm to School Coordinator, Live54218)

Transform WI HoM Models

Get Active Wood County’s Farm to School page includes fruit and vegetable product posters, school recipes and nutrition lesson plans for grades 3-5:

<http://getactive.co.wood.wi.us/GetActiveYouth/FarmtoSchool.aspx>

Vernon County Farm to School website features everything from the Harvest Challenge (student cooking contest) to local chef’s in the lunchroom:

<http://www.farmtoschoolvc.org/>

Live54218 (Brown County) HoM Sample Schedule:

<http://www.cias.wisc.edu/foodservtools14/4-incorporate-local-foods/harvest-of-the-month-sample-calendar.pdf>

La Crosse County Farm to School video – Chef Thomas’ cooking demonstration:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dk_w99wHQQ4&feature=youtu.be

La Crosse County Farm to School video – Cafeteria taste tests:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bUC4KIN6Cqg&feature=youtu.be>

HoM Program Evaluation

Conducting pre and post-Harvest of the Month program evaluations can provide useful information for tracking program effectiveness. This information can be used to strengthen grant proposals and inform ways to improve the program. Examples of important data to collect both before and after instituting programming include:

- Fruit and vegetable knowledge
- Willingness to try fruits and vegetables
- School meal participation rate

The following tools can help you build a strong evaluation framework into your farm to school program:

National Farm to School Network: Evaluation for Transformation: A Cross-Sectoral Evaluation Framework for Farm to School

<http://www.farmtoschool.org/resources-main/evaluation-framework>

Center for Integrated Agricultural Systems - Wisconsin Farm to School: Toolkit for School Nutrition Programs: *Evaluate Your Work*

<http://www.cias.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/8-evaluate-your-work.pdf>



Fruit and vegetable classroom taste test in Kenosha County (Photo: Kenosha County Farm to School)