

Growing Together - Produce Donation Program

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SPEAKERS

Small Farms, Christine Roddick



Small Farms 00:00

Welcome to the small farms podcast, a production of the small farms program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. In this episode, I will talk with Christine Roddick, about the growing together program and encouraging people to get involved with their local food pantry. Christine serves as a human sciences extension specialist and coordinator of the snap education program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. So Christine, thanks for being here with us today.



Christine Roddick 00:27

You're welcome. Glad to be here.



Small Farms 00:29

So before we get started, can you just tell us a little bit about your role here at Iowa State University Extension?



Christine Roddick 00:34

Sure, I work in human sciences extension. So we are the extension arm of the College of human sciences. And my primary role is to coordinate programs for families experiencing poverty. Specifically, we focus on making healthy choices more feasible for families that have a really tight budget. So whether that means direct education, on nutrition, meal planning, cooking, money management, or if it means working in the environment to try to make healthy choices easier for people. All of that kind of is in the realm of what we do out of my office. So lots of work to try to make healthy choices more possible for lowans with low income.



Small Farms 01:19

Definitely. So I'm sure part of that is the growing together program. What can you tell us about that?



Christine Roddick 01:25

So growing together is a partnership between snap education, and the Iowa master gardener program. And snap education is funding that we receive from the federal government to make healthy choices easier for families who are participating in snap which is the new name for food stamps. And so we partner with Master Gardener to use those funds to try to make fruits and vegetables more accessible for families who visit food pantries. We learned from Feeding America, which is a large national organization that operates a lot of food banks. When they did some research here in Iowa, that the number one thing that families visiting food pantries wanted but couldn't get was fresh fruits and vegetables. So to me and to the folks over at Master Gardener, it was pretty clear that it wasn't a matter of trying to convince folks that they should eat fruits and vegetables they knew they should they wanted to they just couldn't access them through the means available to them. And so we thought why don't we try to kind of harness the huge capacity of Master Gardeners all over the state to try to get more produce into food pantries. So growing together is a partnership between campus, master gardeners out in the fields, their county offices that they're a part of, and then food pantries in their communities and the Master Gardeners work with pantries to decide, what is it that you need? What is it that your clients like? And get that planted and grown and safely harvested and delivered? So that for about four to five months out of the year, the pantries have really abundant supply of fruits and vegetables.



Small Farms 03:10

Wow, so are those choices for fresh produce is that decided on a pantry pantry basis? Or is it kind of all over the state?



Christine Roddick 03:19

There are some very variation there. Ideally, when you're doing donation gardening, the best route to go is to talk with the pantry that's going to receive the produce or the site that's going to receive the produce before the garden is even planted so that you're planting things that they really want and need and know that they can move. Things that are not super duper perishable because it needs to be able to be transported usually twice before it actually gets to the table of the person who's going to eat it. So we tend to encourage folks to use hardier vegetables, there are some items that are kind of universally liked by food pantries. So if a gardener, you know is going to say plant an extra row, a relatively small amount of produce things like potatoes, onions, sweet potatoes, zucchini, green beans, those kinds of things tend to be pretty universally appreciated by food pantries. But then you get into things like peppers, melons, squashes, there are some variations in communities as far as the kinds of things that they would most like to have. Some produce like tomatoes, for example, are kind of tricky, because there are some say farmers that grow tomatoes for their you know, their own farm. That's what they sell to make a living. And they might donate all of their smalls the tomatoes

that might not sell very well at market. They might donate to a pantry in their community. In which case that pantry is not going to want you to grow more tomatoes. They probably got more tomatoes than they know what to do with. We also hear that about sweet corn. Then, some pantries already have arrangements with a farmer, or an FFA chapter, or even a 4-H group that is growing and donating sweet corn to them. So they would not want you growing more sweet corn for them. So that's why we say it's really most valuable if you can talk with your local pantry first and say, what is it that you, you know, that your clients would most enjoy and that you would most be prepared to distribute. And it's really important to talk with your pantry as well, because especially in smaller, less populous, more rural parts of the state, pantries might only be open, you know, two to four days a month. And so as a grower, it's important to know that so that you can kind of harvest and time things up. Such that you're, you're harvesting when they're ready to take what you've got, because many of them don't have the ability to refrigerate and hold produce. They want you to deliver it, you know, the day that it's going to go out. So it's important to have those conversations.



Small Farms 05:59

So Christine, some of our listeners would maybe like to get involved but aren't necessarily involved in the, the Master Gardeners program, can they still be growing produce and donating that way? Or do they have to be involved with master gardeners,



Christine Roddick 06:11

you can certainly grow produce on your own and make donations to pantries in your community. You don't need to be connected to master gardeners to be able to do that. If you contact your local pantry, whether it's a large one in a city or a small one that's part of your church and just say, Hey, this is something I'd like to do, you know, I've always got more zucchini than I need, or, you know, my eggplant is crazy. And I got lots that I want to be able to donate, you know, just have that conversation. And for the most part, pantries are willing to accept that garden produce and get it distributed. You can also check in with other sites or venues doesn't have to be food pantries, if your community has a congregate meal site at the Senior Center, or at a church, where older adults can come and have a meal, usually it's a lunchtime meal, they often have a table where things are kind of collected and then given out, often the grocery stores will bring doughnuts or bread that's a day old and folks will take it home with them. But it's also really nice to be able to provide them with garden vegetables. So if you have, you know, we all have that time like end of July and through August where we cannot possibly eat what some plants are yielding. And so, you know, just thinking creatively in your community about where might this produce go to good use? Definitely. If you do want to contact your extension office, they could help get you connected to some of those places. Every county has an extension office Pottawattamie has two. So if you've got questions about what to do with excess produce, contacting them is a good place to start. If you're not sure where donation sites might be in your area.



Small Farms 07:54

Okay, I noticed that there are some growing together grants, what can you tell us about those and how can people get involved and start applying for those?

 Christine Roddick 08:02

Yes, so the growing together funding period is done for this year. But we will do it again next year. We post a we call it an RFP it's a request for proposal to all of the extension counties across the states, we've got 100 county offices. And essentially we offer up funds to be used to support efforts by master gardeners to increase access to fruits and vegetables. So usually that takes the form of donation gardening where they will use their small grants, the largest ones are \$5,000, the average is closer to \$2,000. Which can go a really long way in a garden definitely, if they're trying to build raised beds, do soil amendments, buy plants, buy supplies for greenhouse to do some of their starting inside of a greenhouse. We just want to make sure that we support those efforts for Master Gardeners because just all over the state the master gardeners have been doing this kind of work for a long time. And they have largely been self funding it they'll have plant sales and fundraisers and that's where they've traditionally gotten the money to be able to do this type of thing. And we want to make it as easy as we can for master gardeners to do this type of work. And so offering up some of those SNAP Ed funds for them to be able to take on these projects, makes it just a little bit easier. We have 15 communities that are funded this year 15 counties and in January we will post the next RFP so you don't have to be a master gardener to be involved in the growing together projects. But they do run through the county extension office so the master gardeners in your county will be the ones that kind of take leadership in getting the proposal written. But for the most part, our growing together projects, engage lots of other folks in the community. It's Not just master gardeners. So for example, we've got a couple of growing together projects where the master gardeners are helping to build expand or renovate gardens on property at a food bank or a food pantry. So in which case that garden belongs to the food Baker Food Pantry, the master gardeners are just kind of giving it the kick, it needs to get started and have been able to secure some funds to help make that work. So if you're just a community member and interested in getting involved in a growing together project, you can always contact your local county extension office say, hey, I'd like to get involved with this next year, do you all think you'll submit an application and kind of take it from there? So even though the Master Gardeners kind of lead the way they're by no means the only ones involved?

 Small Farms 10:50

Okay, awesome. So kind of switching topics here just a little bit. You said you enjoy helping people make healthy choices with limited food budgets? How do you go about that? Or what type of what type of things do you encourage?

 Christine Roddick 11:02

Yeah, so we have a whole side of our work that is called by eat live healthy, which is a direct education program. We're in about 20 counties around the state, the counties that have the highest rates of poverty. And in those counties, we have folks out in the field who do direct education with families, either in small groups at a place like a YMCA, or a church or a library. Or if the person needs it, they can do home visits as well. So if say, for example, someone's got a brand new baby, or the family only has one car and it's gone all day, they do some home visiting as well. And in those lessons, they work with the family through an eight lesson series. And they work on things like basic nutrition, child feeding. And when we think about food

resource management or money management, we tend to focus on meal planning smart shopping strategies, making the most of, of food through cooking. So trying to avoid buying is buying food that's partially prepped for you, because that tends to cost much more. But instead trying to build those skills to prep food at home and start from the least expensive ingredients. And we also encourage folks to cook once and eat twice, you know, if people don't enjoy cooking, we talk a lot about food safety and food storage, so that you can kind of make your own ready to go meals from the freezer. So lots of focus on nutrition, cooking and skills like meal planning shopping from a list, which we often don't teach in school anymore. And so, you know, people get to the point where they've had a child or maybe two children, and they just feel overwhelmed about, you know, making things work within their budget, but a little bit of focused education on some of those skills that our mothers and grandmothers were really good at certain helped to make ends meet a little bit better. And then we also have a an online, kind of face to our work. That's called spend smart, eat smart. If you Google spend smart Eat Smart, it's the first thing that comes up. It's a website that is really built around those same principles of plan, shop and cook, and has just some basic kind of information and education. As well as a lot of recipes that have been analyzed for not only taste and quality, but also nutrition, they all have the nutrition facts label, and they've been analyzed for cost so you can see the cost per serving for each recipe. And then we also have a lot of how to videos out on our website that show things from you know, as simple as how to cut up a pepper or a melon to how to create a price book to tell you know when something's on sale, is it really a good price? Or is it just because it has this you know, big sticker on it that I think it's a good price. So from the very simple to the to the more complex. All of that information is available out on spend Smarty smart so we encourage families that participate in our programs to follow spend smart eat smart on social media sign up for the blog, get connected with the website. Because when those eight lessons are over, we kind of then are separated from that family. And so we want them to continue to have access to nutrition information that they can trust. There's a lot out there online related to nutrition and food that is not based on research. And so we encourage them to use spend smart eat smart as kind of a trusted place to go when they just need a good recipe or need a question answered about what a label claim means or something like



Small Farms 14:53

that. Awesome. That sounds like a really important program.



Christine Roddick 14:55

Yeah, we certainly think so. Yes.



Small Farms 14:58

So just as we wrap up here You're it's definitely planting season time to plan gardens, what can some farmers do to get involved and just try to give back to their community? Through that?



Christine Roddick 15:08

Yeah, I would say the most important way to start is to try to reach out to, you know, the folks in your community that are working on serving families with low income in terms of food

in your community that are working on serving families with low income in terms of food access. So is it a local food pantry? Is it a church? Is it a congregate meal site, and just talk with them about what they might like in terms of fruits and vegetables? Is there a way that you can help connect families to produce and just kind of follow their lead, you know, see what they think would be the most valuable or the most helpful, and try to make those connections. In some cases, farmers markets, are even a place that you can turn to some farmers markets, this is more in big cities, but in some smaller ones as well have developed food rescue, which is basically a truck from the food pantry that pulls up at the end of the market. And anything that growers don't want to take back with them, that's not going to be saleable by the next market, they can just leave on the pantry truck and it will get distributed that day or the next day, instead of ending up in compost or getting disposed of. So that's another way that growers can really make the most of what they're growing and get as much of it onto people's plates as possible. We you know, we know that no grower likes to see what they've you know, cared for going to waste. But pretty much every gardener and every grower sees some of that happening. So we're really just trying to create systems that make it easier for gardeners and growers to be able to get that produce to people who can eat it as quickly as possible and avoid waste when we can.



Small Farms 16:49

Awesome. Well, do you have anything else you'd like to add for us?



Christine Roddick 16:53

I think that that's probably about it. I would just encourage listeners you know to reach out to your extension office and let them know if you're interested in this type of work so they can connect you with a growing together project if they've already got one and if they don't keep you in mind for next year. It's a great way for people to kind of get involved in a really important problem that we have here in Iowa we're a pretty prosperous state but at the same time about one in eight Iowans is food insecure and so anything that we can, you know, each do a little bit to help address that problem is great from my perspective.



Small Farms 17:31

Definitely. Well, thank you so much for being with us on the show today.



Christine Roddick 17:34

You're welcome. Thanks for having me.



Small Farms 17:36

This podcast will be available on our Web website. www.extension.iastate.edu/smallfarms thanks for listening

