



FARM TO SUMMER:

Why Summer Meal Programs are Ripe for Local Foods and Agriculture-Based Activities

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SUMMER IS A TIME of agricultural abundance: plump stone fruits hang heavy on trees, juicy melons and tomatoes explode from their vines, beans begin to dry in their pods, and livestock fed on the most nutritious spring grasses produce delicious meat and dairy products. In most areas of the United States, local harvests peak in the warmest months, just as the school year draws to a close. Luckily for local farmers and kids that participate in school meal programs, an increasing number of sites operating USDA's Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) are capitalizing on the many opportunities that summer brings to offer fresh, local foods and outdoor activities that help children develop healthy habits.

Farm to summer benefits everyone

There are numerous benefits to "bringing the farm" to summer feeding sites:

- * Sponsors can increase participation by improving the quality and appeal of meals and keeping kids engaged through fun, hands-on activities.
- * Schools can get started with efforts to source locally during the summer months, testing out recipes using local foods and creating menus that kids will love.
- * Food service operators that already source locally during the school year can build upon existing programming and contribute to a continuous, year-round farm to school program.
- * Regional producers benefit from a reliable outlet for their products during the summer months.
- * Kids and teens access fresh, nutritious meals and experiential learning activities at meal sites, staying nourished and active while school is out.

What is the Summer Food Service Program?

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is a federally-funded, state-administered program. The SFSP reimburses providers who serve healthy meals to children and teens in low-income areas at no charge primarily during the summer months when school is not in session.

Sourcing summer's harvest

Summer meal sponsors can boost participation by improving the quality of meals with fresh products. Local foods span the entire meal tray, from fruits and vegetables to dairy, grains, meat, eggs, and beans. Sponsors can find seasonal products in their freshest state in the summertime through the same sources that schools use to source locally during the school year: direct from farmers, through food hubs, or through distributors, or food service management companies. But summertime may make the following sources even more accessible and may be worth specifically seeking out to supply your summer meals program:



Farmer’s markets and community supported

agriculture (CSA) programs: Because of the lower volume of product often needed to fulfill summer meals, farmers markets and CSA’s that may not provide enough product for school year programs can be an excellent provider of local foods for summer meals. Visit www.usdalocalfooddirectories.com to find farmers markets and CSA’s.

School and community gardens: Edible gardens can contribute fresh herbs or produce to meals, and provide a source of entertainment and engagement for children, and even family members, at meal sites.

Keeping Kids Engaged

Sponsors can help children and teens stay healthy during summer months not only with the nutritious meals they provide, but also with hands-on activities that create positive learning environments while school is out.

Grow or visit edible gardens : Kids can get their hands dirty and learn more about where their food comes from by building or maintaining gardens. Gardens are also a great way to involve parents and guardians, who can volunteer to do garden maintenance or participate in educational events in the garden. Schools that have gardens operating during the school year can plan ahead to maintain them during the summer months, and align gardening activities with their summer feeding program.

Take a farm field trip or host a farmer: Trips to the farm, farmers market, or garden can strengthen sponsors’ relationships with their producers, teach kids about where their food comes from, and introduce them to

the field of agricultural production. If transportation is a barrier, producers may be able to come to meal sites!

Conduct taste tests or cooking demonstrations:

Engaging kids in the process of preparing meals with fresh products gives them a significant role in the meal program and encourages them to try new foods. Sponsors can gauge kids’ feedback, and use results of taste tests for their benefit. Many food service directors take advantage of the summer months to try out new products or update recipes to ensure they are kid-approved before serving during the school year.

Choose an “edible” summer feeding site: Sponsors of summer meal programs can set up open feeding sites in income eligible areas, and may factor in locations that include or are in close proximity to a garden or other outdoor spaces that can contribute to agriculture-based programming. Consider starting a feeding site at a farmers market (http://www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/sfsp/SMT-Farmers_Markets.pdf), and take advantage of the proximity to local producers and range of activities already occurring on-site.

Learn More

Visit the Farm to Summer section of USDA’s Farm to School website (www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/farm-summer) to find more guidance and resources on bringing the farm to your summer meal program.

Our Procuring Local Foods for Child Nutrition Program Guide (www.fns.usda.gov/sites/default/files/F2S_Procuring_Local_Foods_Child_Nutrition_Prog_Guide.pdf) showcases the many ways summer meal sponsors can purchase local foods.



For more information, and to sign up to receive USDA’s bi-weekly Farm to School E-letter, please visit www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool. Questions? Email us at farmtoschool@fns.usda.gov.

