

SEEDS THAT FEED

Food Pantry Nutrition Project
Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security

Seeds that Feed, an innovative project that distributes free garden seeds and gardening information to food pantry participants, aims to increase the amount of fresh vegetables grown in home and community gardens.

Results

In 2012, the Food Pantry Nutrition Project distributed approximately 5,000 packs of seeds to 1,000 families through eight food pantries in central and northeast Missouri. Brief interviews with a sample of project participants found that...

- 86% of people planted a garden.
- Despite the record heat and drought in the Midwest in 2012, 54% said their gardens were productive or somewhat productive.
- Of those people, 55% did some canning, 67% did some freezing, and 90% shared produce with friends, families, or neighbors.

How does it work?

The idea is relatively simple and is a perfect project for Master Gardeners, 4H groups, or high school FFA classes. The general idea follows.

- Seeds are acquired, sorted, and displayed at food pantries in the spring and early summer. If possible, seeds of cool weather vegetables can be displayed again in June and early July to encourage fall gardening.
- Basic gardening information is also gathered and displayed along with the seeds.
- Displays are set up and staffed during pantry hours in order to provide assistance to people with gardening questions. People generally really like the chance to talk about gardening.
- Unstaffed displays can also be created as long as they are restocked on a regular basis.



Where to find seeds?

- Ideally, new seeds will be purchased in bulk from places like Morgan County Seeds and repackaged. This may take a bit more time and cost a little bit of money, but the quality and selection of new seed will be much better than donated seed. Bulk seed prices are very reasonable and starting with fresh seed will help increase gardeners' chances of success.
- Old seeds may be acquired through a variety of sources. In the late summer or early fall of each year, make requests of hardware stores, local seed dealers, and other places in the community for unsold vegetable garden seed. Also, seed companies including Baker Creek Heirloom Seed Company, Seed Savers Exchange, and Johnny's Select Seeds have seed donation programs.
- Local churches can sponsor a *seed drive* for new or left-over seeds or money to purchase seeds.
- Regardless of whether new or old seed is collected, be sure to store it in a cool, dry location. Air tight jars, plastic tubs, and popcorn tins make good containers.

- Not all donated seed may be worth keeping. Consider doing a germination test on the seeds or consulting a seed viability chart (<http://www.ipm.iastate.edu/ipm/hortnews/1999/4-2-1999/veggielife.html>). Discard anything that germinates poorly or is out of date.

What about gardening information?

University of Missouri Extension, both through local offices, Regional Specialists, and the internet (extension.missouri.edu) has a wealth of gardening information. The following publications are good places to start.

- Vegetable Planting Calendar (G6201)
- Raised Bed Gardening (G6985)
- Vegetable Harvest and Storage (G6226)
- Frequently Asked Vegetable Questions (G6400)
- Making and Using Compost (G6956)
- Freezing Basics (GH1501)
- Freezing Vegetables (GH1503)

What else can be done?

Don't stop with seeds and few handouts. There are a number of things that can be done to give people a greater chance of gardening success.

- **Create a monthly newsletter or blog.** Seasonal tips, recipes, and gardening advice can be compiled and distributed at the food pantry on a regular basis.
- **Distribute vegetable transplants.** Consider working with a local nursery or hobby greenhouse growers to acquire donated or purchased vegetable transplants. In the spring, cabbage makes a good choice, along with potatoes and onions. In the summer, tomatoes, peppers, and sweet potato slips can be distributed. Start small and consider making an announcement prior to the date you plan to distribute plants. Also consider taking orders for transplants to help gauge the amount needed.
- **Help start a community garden.** Community gardens located at food pantries or nearby give new gardeners a chance to see a garden in action. They also provide a space for hands on workshops and demonstrations, not to mention a source of fresh produce for the food pantry.
- **Host gardening classes, workshops, or special events.** Poll food pantry participants and community members to see if there is interest in holding classes or workshops. A special event, like a tomato festival or harvest festival is a fun way to celebrate and provide a little bit of gardening instruction. Keep in mind that it may be challenging for food pantry participants to make a special trip to a class or event. Consider doing something during regular pantry hours.

