

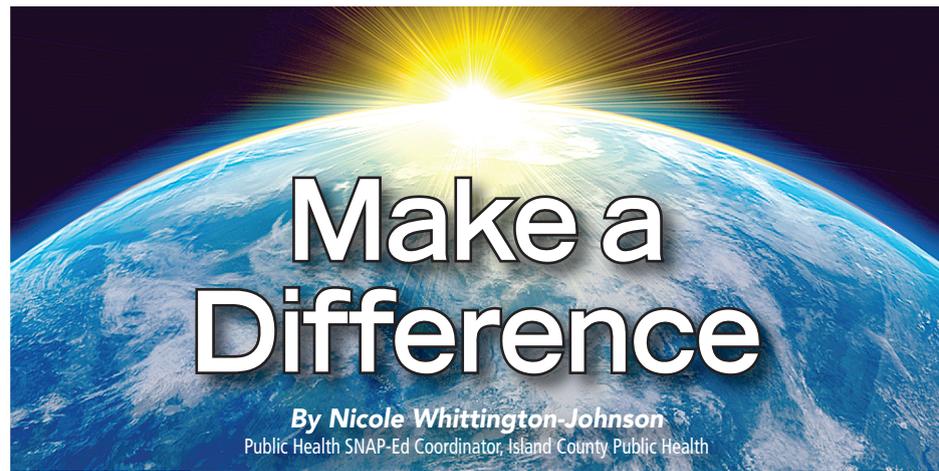
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Make a Difference

By Nicole Whittington-Johnson
Public Health SNAP-Ed Coordinator, Island County Public Health

GROW-A-ROW FOR NEIGHBORS IN NEED THIS HARVEST SEASON

As a recent transplant to Whidbey Island, I have been incredibly impressed by the community's ability to organize and make a difference in a neighbor's life when called upon. Recognizing there is a need is the first step. Our food banks are in continual need of fresh produce all year long.

This is where Grow-A-Row comes in! The Island County Public Health Department has received a grant from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education (SNAP-Ed) to help increase access to fresh fruits and vegetables by mobilizing resources within the community to bridge the gap of inequity.

So what is Grow-A-Row? It is a really easy way for backyard gardeners and farmers to help out their neighbors in need on Whidbey. The idea is you dedicate one row of your garden this season to the growing of fruits or vegetables which will be continually donated to the food bank of your choosing throughout the harvest season. This ensures everyone has access to quality, fresh produce regardless of income bracket.

There are real barriers to eating nutritious foods, such as the expense of fresh produce.

"It's expensive to eat healthily. By providing the food bank with fresh produce you provide clients with nutritious foods they may not otherwise be able to have," explains Jean Wieman, Director of North Whidbey Help House Food Bank. We are calling all green thumbs to help nourish families, seniors, and individuals in need in our community.

How can you donate?

There are three food banks on the island, each with unique hours of operation. Drop off your donations to the food bank of your choice.

Good Cheer serves the South Whidbey community. It has a "grocery store" style setup and participants are able to shop for items they need most based on a point system calculated by family size. It is open five days a week. Hours of operation are Monday, Wednesday – Saturday from 9:30 a.m. – 4:40 p.m. and is located at 2812 Grimm Rd. in Langley.

Gifts from the Heart primarily serves Central Whidbey. It is located in Coupeville at 203 Main Street and open the second and fourth Wednesday of each month from 2 p.m. – 5 p.m. Donations can be dropped off as early as 9:30 a.m. on these days. Because it is only open twice a month, it has a higher concentration of clients to serve on distribution day, making its need for fresh produce just as great. It uses tables set up as different food group stations – including fresh produce – and hands out reusable bags that include staple food items.

North Whidbey Help House serves most of North Whidbey. It is also open 5 days a week, Monday – Friday from 8 a.m. – 4 p.m. and are located at 1097 SE Hathaway Street

in Oak Harbor. Participants receive an "emergency food box" once a month to help bridge the need between pay periods and can pick up fresh produce and baked goods twice a week, as well.

Why should you donate?

Providing fresh fruits and vegetables to your local food bank deepens our sense of community and place on top of providing an immediate need. Molly Hughes, mayor of Coupeville, shared how Dale Sherman's Hubbard squash is like "gold around Gifts from the Heart." Her clients look forward to it at the start of each season and share stories of roasting it for their children with a sprinkle of brown sugar.

Food insecurity affects our community in many ways and is particularly devastating for children. Proper nutrition is critical to a child's physical and mental development. "Growing-a-row" of fresh produce for our food banks will in turn grow a healthier community.

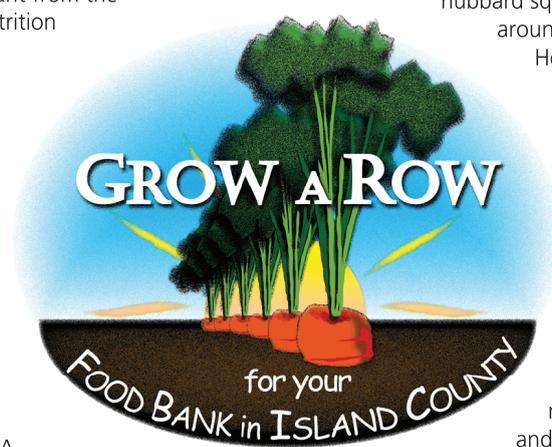
What should you grow?

Well, growing what you like to eat is always a good place to start. Just think: "What would I grow for my family?" Some particular favorites around the food banks happen to be carrots, zucchini, broccoli, berries, and tomatoes.

Here are some helpful tips you may already be aware of for handling fresh produce donations:

- Pick early in the day for best quality.
- Keep produce out of the heat and in the shade.
- For delicate produce, like tomatoes and berries, avoid deep containers; the weight on top damages produce below.
- Deliver your produce to local food banks soon after harvesting to retain freshness and quality. Make sure to visually inspect produce for bugs and brush away any visible dirt before donating.
- If possible, package produce in quantities you would typically find at the grocery store. Clean paper or plastic grocery bags work great. This saves time and makes distribution easier for the food bank volunteers.

Spread the word! Dedicate a row of produce in your garden to be donated every harvest. Donate regularly! You can drop off your donations at your food bank of choice, and if you want to add an extra gold star to your superhero cape, record approximate weight of your donations so we can best track our impact on our community. Tell a friend, coordinate donation drop-offs after harvest, get your children or grandchildren involved. If you are feeling extra enthusiastic, you might even consider donating starts in pots for families who would like to try growing a vegetable of their own. Contact information and food bank hours can also be found at the Island County Public Health Website: www.islandcountywa.gov/health



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