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NEWS

Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens announces new sustainability initiatives

Gardens provide diverse produce for BPNN, local pantries

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The Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens supplies a variety of fresh produce to over 30 food pantries in Dane County.
Photo submitted

In Wisconsin, people of color are much more likely to experience nutrition insecurity than their white counterparts, according to a 2016 Public Health Madison and Dane County report.

Similarly, minority groups in Wisconsin face higher nutrition insecurity rates than in the United States overall.

According to Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens (MAFPG) – a nonprofit organization that provides fresh produce to over 30 local food pantries – individuals are more likely to incorporate fruits and vegetables in their diets if they are familiar elements of their native cuisine.

Since the group's inception more than two decades ago, MAFPG has grown, gleaned (collected) and donated more than two million pounds of first-choice, fresh, nutritious and culturally relevant produce to the Dane County emergency food system, according to their website.

In a further effort to better serve Dane County's diverse populations, MAFPG recently announced new sustainability initiatives to bring even more culturally relevant produce to local communities and pantries, such as Badger Prairie Needs Network (BPNN) in Verona.

The first sustainability initiative is MAFPG's purchase of the 15-acre Forward Garden in the Town of Middleton. By purchasing Forward Garden, MAFPG said the organization can double the production of fruits and vegetables and expand educational opportunities in relation to sustainable agriculture.

A Phase I Capital Campaign including donations from various individuals and community organizations, along with a \$660,000 grant from Dane County, made the purchase possible. Prior to this, the organization leased Forward Garden from the Pope/Zoerb family beginning in 2020, according to MAFPG.

Additionally, MAFPG announced the start of a \$500,000 Phase II Capital Funding Campaign. Through this campaign, the organization will install a new ecologically friendly irrigation system, invest in more advanced soil conditioning equipment, expand the current composting program at Forward Garden, develop an orchard and build raised beds to improve accessibility for volunteers, according to MAFPG.

MAFPG already incorporates several sustainable practices, such as gleaned produce from local farms and backyard gardens, using cover crops, rotating crops, adding pollinator-supporting native gardens, installing buffer strips and minimizing rototilling when possible, according to MAFPG.

Currently, the organization grows from 10 different gardens – both with affiliates and members.

One of MAFPG's affiliate gardens is located right in Verona at the UW Health Verona Clinic, and has grown produce for BPNN since 2015, according to the MAFPG website.

In a typical year, the garden yields 800-1,000 pounds of produce, such as tomatillo, grape and Roma tomatoes, jalapeño and other hot peppers, broccoli, cilantro, squash, beans, strawberries, rhubarb, asparagus and chives, according to Dr. Brian Arndt, the site lead of the UW Health Verona Family Medicine Clinic and MAFPG Board of Directors volunteer development director.

This produce helps fill a nutritional gap by providing routinely requested food pantry items that were previously not always available, he said.

"I'm proud to be part of a healthcare organization (UW Health) that recognizes the importance of family physicians engaging with community partners to help make communities overall healthier places to live, grow and thrive," Arndt said.

'Creating nutrition security'

According to the 2020-2025 Dietary Guidelines for Americans, adults are recommended to consume 1.5-2 cups of fruits and 2-3 cups of vegetables daily to prevent and treat nutrition-related chronic conditions.

Only 11.6% of low-income adults meet the recommended fruit intake in Wisconsin, however, with 7.6% meeting vegetable recommendations, according to the University of Wisconsin Department of Family Medicine and Community Health.

It's not entirely clear why adults don't consume these daily recommendations, but perceived barriers include cost, along with limited availability and access, Arndt said. For some low-income individuals, such barriers may have worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another factor – known as social determinants of health – can impact health and influence the opportunities available for practicing healthy behaviors, Arndt said. These include "conditions in which persons are born, live, learn, work, play, worship and age."

Tailored intervention efforts are needed to reduce the age, sex, racial/ethnic and income disparities in meeting nutritional recommendations, Arndt said. Yet one way to increase awareness is through education and marketing efforts, which can start at a young age.

"It's important to teach young kids about nutrition since eating well can improve their health throughout life and they are better supported to grow, learn and thrive," he said.

One such effort began in 2017, when the UW Health Verona Clinic established the ChopChop Family Cooking Club at BPNN to provide healthy cooking classes for kids (ages 6-11) and their families. Each series includes four lessons, with two taught in English and two in Spanish.

The lessons focus on the basics of eating healthy portions, eating more fruits and vegetables, minimizing sugary drinks, trying whole grains, mixing up proteins and getting involved with things like putting away groceries, stirring ingredients, peeling fruits, assembling salads or setting the table, Arndt said.

Volunteering is another great way for children – and adults – to learn more about nutrition and harvesting, whether through the UW Health Verona Clinic or other MAFPG gardens.

“When kids engage with us in the gardens, they can learn where their food comes from, which also influences their likelihood to try more fruits and vegetables,” Arndt said.

Aside from providing education, the clinic’s garden works to create good access to culturally relevant produce – an important part of treating chronic conditions such as diabetes, hypertension and obesity, Arndt said.

“We’re trying to move the community conversation from addressing food insecurity to creating nutrition security,” he said.

Last year, BPNN received more than 13,000 pounds of donated produce from community gardens, including MAFPG, Badger Prairie Community Garden, Crossroads Community Farm and surplus from home gardens, according to Communications Director Lisa Marshall.

Donated produce helps stretch the BPNN’s budget and ensures guests receive healthy choices of fresh fruits and vegetables that are otherwise expensive to purchase in the grocery store, she said. When produced locally, it is also a win-win for the environment – as it eliminates transportation costs and keeps surplus fruits and vegetables out of the landfill.

Dagny Knight – a current BPNN volunteer and previous produce coordinator – said distributing the fantastic produce from MAFPG is really “the easy part.”

“They bring it to us, they bring a variety, they bring plentiful amounts,” she said. “I think it’s really been a draw for our guests – they travel from all around Dane County because we have a reputation for having such amazing produce.”

BPNN is currently serving two times the number of guests the pantry served last year, Knight said. Because of MAFPG, BPNN can offer an additional day for guests to come for produce – with generally around 40 families visiting within two-hour periods.

“It has such a big impact on our communities,” she said.

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Just The Facts

The Madison Area Food Pantry Gardens provides area pantries with the following crops to support minority cuisines:

- Cilantro
- Okra
- Eggplant
- Mustard greens
- Bok choy
- Collard greens
- Jícama
- Garlic
- Bitter melon
- Sweet potatoes
- A wide variety of peppers, including jalapeño, habanero, Thai chili, serrano, bell, poblano and lunchbox

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