Chapter 3

Where Does Whatcom County Get its Food?

Market surveys spend thousands of dollars trying to discern what, where, and how much people spend on food. Information about trends in consumer food purchasing and farm sales is integral to any CFA because they are the ultimate indicator of the health of the local food economy. Beyond the economic health of the agricultural and food system, the viability of local farms as well as retail and wholesale food businesses has a direct impact upon the availability of food to Whatcom County citizens. By examining where Whatcom County residents are buying their food and what barriers they face to accessing that food easily and affordably, we can begin to determine the localized market potential for farms and also what opportunity exists for the development and strengthening of the entire local food system—from farm to processing facility to food stores to residents’ kitchen tables.

This CFA does not use marketing data or provide references to any particular business; the data that is presented describes food-buying practices by source (grocery, restaurant, farm direct, etc.). This CFA also looks at food that people produce in groups and food that can be accessed through emergency providers (such as food banks). While it does not document the number of residents with home gardens, this section describes a variety of community gardens—increasing in number each year—that exist in Whatcom County.

How Whatcom County Residents Spend their Food Dollars

In 2007, Whatcom County residents spent over $642 million at grocery stores, restaurants, and direct from farmers. Such expenditures increased over the past 10 years. While sales of food products direct from farmers is a small portion of food purchased, the value of these sales increased fourfold from 1997 (less than $1 million in sales) to 2007 ($4 million in sales).¹

In 2009, Whatcom County was home to 28 supermarkets and 386 restaurants (including fast food restaurants); convenience stores and food outlets attached to gas stations are other options for food purchase.²

![Sales of Food Products ($1,000s)](chart.png)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1997</th>
<th>2002</th>
<th>2007</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>grocery stores</td>
<td>303,451</td>
<td>307,490</td>
<td>373,034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>restaurants</td>
<td>163,297</td>
<td>199,296</td>
<td>264,728</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>farmer direct</td>
<td>908</td>
<td>1,785</td>
<td>4,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Farmer-Direct Marketing and Sales
Consistent with the national resurgence of interest in knowing where food comes from and how it is grown, growing numbers of Whatcom County residents are looking to purchase food directly from producers who operate within or close to Whatcom County. Farms are finding profitability in this approach to marketing and sales: they skip the intermediary and retain full retail value for their product, they make connections with consumers and establish loyalty, and they can learn about what products are wanted and why. Farmer-direct marketing can happen in a number of ways, such as consumer farm visits, farmers markets, community supported agriculture (CSA), and direct to restaurants and retail stores.

The Bellingham Farmers Market operates twice per week: the Saturday market operates in downtown Bellingham and the Wednesday market operates in Fairhaven. Products for sale include fruits and vegetables; value-added agricultural products, such as honey and apple cider; dairy; and garden plants. Sales in the farm sales category this category have increased over the past two years at both markets. Other regional farmers’ markets—in Blaine, Ferndale, Lummi Island, and Lynden—are much younger and have rules and regulations for vendors that differ from those of the Bellingham Farmers Market.

Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) is a way for buyers to purchase a share of what a farmer produces by paying for it in advance of the growing season. Members of a CSA usually receive a box of produce or other farm products weekly. The shareholders (consumers) take on some of the farmer’s risk, the farmer gets much-needed money before the growing season, and relationships are made between farmer and consumer. According to the 2007 Census of Agriculture, 22 farms in Whatcom County had CSA programs. Out of 1,483 farms in Whatcom County recognized in the 2007 U.S. Agriculture Census, 18% (273 farms) engage in direct marketing of some kind. That number has grown by 44% in Whatcom County since 2002 (190 farms), far outstripping the Washington State growth rate of 19.7%.
Farmer Direct Marketing: Number of farms and value of sales

$1,000s

- 0
- 50
- 100
- 150
- 200
- 250
- 300


$1,000

Farms
Access to Food Sources in Whatcom County

Data relating to physical addresses (of farms, grocery stores, etc.) can be mapped using a GIS System. This is particularly valuable in the context of a CFA because it allows us to identify segments of Whatcom County’s population which might struggle to access sources of food adequate to fulfill dietary needs. Data collected from the 2000 U.S. Census as well as numerous other websites and organizations were used to develop a series of maps using ESRI ArcView Software. The following maps illustrate the distribution of Whatcom County convenience and grocery stores as well as farms using direct marketing and their relation to population, income, and proximity to public transportation. Income data were used to identify the percentage of households with annual income under $35,000 per census block group.\textsuperscript{iii}
Whatcom County Population & Grocery Store Distribution

Legend
- Grocery Store

Population Per Block Group
- 0 - 689
- 690 - 1,319
- 1,320 - 1,929
- 1,930 - 2,799
- 2,800 - 4,982

This map illustrates the distribution of grocery stores throughout Whatcom County related to population per census block group.

Whatcom County Population & Convenience Store Distribution

Legend
- Convenience Store

Population Per Block Group
- 0 - 689
- 690 - 1,319
- 1,320 - 1,929
- 1,930 - 2,799
- 2,800 - 4,982

This map illustrates the distribution of convenience stores throughout Whatcom County related to population per census block group.
These food maps have a number of important implications for this CFA. Rural residents (those living in unincorporated regions of the County, accounting for 44% of Whatcom residents) are most likely to have convenience stores as their closest place to purchase food. Similarly, east-County residents who do not have a car and rely upon public transportation have a long way to travel to reach a grocery store.

Farm stands are abundant in Whatcom County, but access can be difficult for people who use public transportation; many farm stands are not located on bus routes. An example of this is the cluster of produce and farm stands on Northwest Avenue, north of Axton Road.
Farm-to-School Programs in Whatcom County

Farm-to-school programs are gaining popularity on a national level, and some limited successes have been seen locally. As part of this CFA, we interviewed food service coordinators and people involved in farm-to-school programs locally to find out about what institutions are currently doing with locally produced food, whether they are interested in purchasing more food from local farmers, and what the barriers are to purchasing locally grown food. All of the answers are given in a table in the appendix to this CFA, and a summary is given here.

All food service directors purchased food from large food service providers, such as Food Services of America or Sodexo. Most school districts also made an effort to purchase some locally grown food throughout the year.

Products included:

- Apples from Bellewood Acres.
- Produce from Growing Washington in Everson.
- Dairy Valley milk from Mt. Vernon.

Many food service directors observed benefits to purchasing food locally:

- Obtaining fresher and higher quality products.
- Supporting local farmers.
- Stimulating the local economy.
- Encouraging connections between students and local farms.

When asked if they are interested in purchasing local food, food service directors replied with a range of answers, including:

- “Yes!”
- “We’d love to buy whatever we can locally.”
- “I’d love to purchase all our food locally if what we needed was available and affordable.”
- “Yes, but it has to be balanced with our economic needs.”
- “Not opposed, if barriers could be addressed. Bellewood Acres works really well.”

When asked what some of the barriers were to purchasing locally grown food, answers fell into several categories:

Price of food

Food service providers struggle to get the best products for the lowest price; many see purchasing from local farms as a benefit to their missions but often cannot justify it financially. Schools and institutions may not have enough money to pay for local products, which can cost more than products purchased through a national distributor. One school noted that it has approximately $1 to spend on food for lunch per student per day. Federal, State, and local grants can make farm-to-school programs viable, but few such grants have been available
in Whatcom County. Districts also receive volume discounts when purchasing through national distributors; a concern is that if too much local food is purchased, that volume discount would be reduced.

Available facilities
Costs for processing food are a factor, as many institutions do not have the funds to pay for labor or for in-house processing of raw food—the typical state in which food from local farms is delivered (e.g., whole carrots versus carrot sticks). Institutions may also lack the facilities, such as cold storage and preparation equipment. Food service providers worry about using funds to pay for in-house processing when the money could be used for food purchasing instead. The product delivered must be consistent in size for ease of use; this consistency is not always available from smaller farms. Independent schools (those not part of a public school district) have also run into issues with not having kitchen facilities that are up to health department standards and the costs to reach those standards are too high.

Seasonality and availability
The school year does not correspond well with the local growing season. Some crops, such as apples, are an exception, and these products are finding their way into institutional cafeterias. Food service providers surveyed often noted that availability of local produce is a large issue, especially during the winter months. They worried about the ability of local farms to supply enough produce for an entire school or school district. One food service director noted that institutions sometimes need to be able to increase the quantity of food they receive on short notice. One strategy currently being employed by local farms is to join together through the non-profit farm organization Growing Washington to sell produce collectively to Western Washington University (WWU), thus allowing them to meet the University’s quantity and availability demands. Both the farms and the University report success in this venture.

Delivery
Food service directors noted that receiving deliveries from many smaller trucks throughout the day can be disruptive to their schedules and that receiving one shipment from a large supplier fit better with the way their programs are run. One food service director noted that Growing Washington (see above) was doing a good job coordinating delivery from several smaller farms, and another noted that one farm from Snohomish County was easy to work with (they did not give a specific reason for this).

Food safety liability
Food service providers are very concerned about food safety and liability issues. Many institutions require high insurance coverage for their vendors that may be too expensive for small-scale, local farmers. For example, WWU’s food service provider, Sodhexo, requires vendors to carry a $5 million liability insurance policy. In addition, products must be traceable to a farm; if several farms are providing one product for cooperative delivery, this kind of traceability may not be possible. One institutional food service director noted the potential food safety risk involved with in-house cutting of produce.

Solutions
Those involved with this CFA talked with people connected to farm-to-school programs, who offered some possible solutions to the above barriers:

- Coordinating several smaller growers to provide smaller quantities of one or two staple produce items and merge the products to have enough to supply a school. This is currently being done by Growing Washington, and significant room exists for expansion of this strategy.
• Introducing local produce one day a week, or every other week, that could be provided by a single farmer.

• Matching one farmer (or more) with a nearby school to provide produce and have the school children get involved with the farm.

• Provide a local cold storage facility to store produce from many farms and make it easier for institutions to pick up products.

• Serve several institutions from a central processing center that would handle and prepare produce from local farms. One delivery per day to each institution from that center would eliminate multiple deliveries by different farms.

• Institutions and farmers work together to plan what, how much, and when to plant so that produce would be available when institutions need it.

**Locally funded programs**

Starting in 2009, the Sustainable Whatcom Fund of the Whatcom Community Foundation is supporting a Farm-to-School Initiative. They are funding a support team and mini-grants of up to $5,000 each to schools or organizations for pilot programs to bring more local food into schools. Fifteen pilot projects were funded by March 2010: 7 public schools, 6 independent schools, and 2 other organizations. Projects were required to be sustainable once the funding ended. Some examples of these projects are:

• Assisting with the costs of improving the infrastructure of a local farm to grow kiwifruit. The farm would work with the school to have student educational opportunities around growing, training, and harvesting the fruit, and would pay for the infrastructure over time by providing the school with food from the farm.

• Improving kitchen facilities so that local food could be purchased and prepared properly. (Some of these projects ran into hurdles with the health department’s standards for commercial food kitchens.)

• Pay for school families to receive CSA shares from a local farm. These families would then give a contribution through the PTA to the “local healthy snacks fund,” which would be used to buy snacks for the whole school.

• Serve local healthy snacks to kids after school. In the process, the project team would identify local food producers who could supply products and understand children’s food preferences. This information could be passed along to the food service director for incorporation into the meal program.

• The Bellingham School District has formed a Farm to School Advisory Group to help the food service director to bring more local food into the schools. This is a district recognized group and includes parents, students, teachers, kitchen workers, farmers, and community members.

In 2010, the City of Bellingham offered a grant (administered by Whatcom Community Foundation) with the desire to get local, healthy food to school age children. A partnership of the Rebound Program of Whatcom County, Bellingham School District, and Common Threads Farm was the recipient of this funding. The project will provide at-risk children attending the Ray of Hope summer camp with local food, farm field trips, and gardening experiences. School garden curricular materials and a student-run farm stand will also be developed through this program.

**Food waste**

Food service directors were also asked about how they deal with food waste and whether they are interested in composting or recycling. All Whatcom County school districts with the exception of Blaine, Ferndale, and Lynden have implemented composting programs. For more information on food waste, see Chapter 10 of this CFA.
A deeper look into WWU food service

Seth Vidaña from WWU Office of Sustainability gave some insight into the food service program at WWU. Historically, WWU has used very little local food. In the past 3 years, the food service provider, Sodexho, has increased its local food (defined as within 150 miles) purchases to 5.5% of the total amount. Most of this comes as liquid milk (from Edaleen Dairy) and apples (from Bellewood Acres), with additional products coming from other farms in Washington State. Vertical integration of supply chains encourages Sodexho’s institutional customers to purchase their food from the Sodexho distributor. However, the company’s service at WWU receives high marks from WWU students and staff within Sodexho’s corporate evaluation system for efforts to purchase local food. Sodexho is also doing a lot to reduce their waste products, including the introduction of a “trayless” dining hall program, which has reduced food waste generated by diners by 30%, and working with Sanitary Service Corporation (SSC)’s FoodPlus! recycling program to have food waste collected from kitchens, dining halls, and Birnham Wood residences. The result of these initiatives is that approximately 140,000 pounds of food waste per year avoids the landfill.

Other food-related activities at WWU

Students have organized a couple of groups on campus looking into sustainable food systems. The “Students for Sustainable Food” group is interested in bringing more locally grown organic food into the food service at WWU, and the “Student Co-op” group is pursuing a student-run dining hall. There is interest in creating a farmers market or Community Supported Agriculture program on campus for students and staff to purchase locally grown food to prepare at home. WWU also has the Outback Farm, an area of campus where students have a community garden for producing their own food; other areas are designated for student projects, such as the forest garden and edible weed garden projects.

The Emergency Food System

Poverty is a major factor in the access to food. With 14.7% of Whatcom County residents below federal poverty guidelines, the emergency food system is an important institution for feeding the community. It consists of many organizations helping to provide food for those in need.

Although not all emergency food providers maintain exact records of clients served and the growing need in Whatcom County, several of the larger organizations do. The number of client visits to the Bellingham Food Bank since 2007 has risen by 39%. Other service providers agreed that they had experienced similar increases.

Programs outlined below are divided into two sections: emergency food providers, such as food banks, and organizations that grow food for emergency food programs and providers. All information is from personal communication with directors or key employees/volunteers of the emergency food programs.

Food Banks and Emergency Food Providers

**Bellingham Food Bank** is the largest emergency food provider in Whatcom County. Each year the Bellingham Food Bank receives over 100,000 client visits and distributes more than 2 million pounds of food to low-income individuals and families; 35% of clients are children and 16% are seniors. The Bellingham Food Bank also serves as the redistribution center for 9 other Whatcom County food banks and receives USDA commodity food and other bulk food on behalf of the County food bank system.

Bellingham Food Bank works with grocers, bakeries, fisheries and other food producers and retailers to recover any of their edible waste for redirection to its distribution stream.

Working with Growing Washington, the Bellingham Food Bank manages the Small Potatoes Gleaning Project, the Food Bank Farm, and the Farm to Food Bank project (see next section: Food Being Grown for Emergency Food Programs).
Bellingham Food Bank’s Victory Garden Program encourages local gardeners to donate their excess produce to the Food Bank. This program yields approximately 15,000 pounds of produce each year.

*Blaine Food Bank* serves about 280 people per week over 3 days. Director Robin Kindle thinks that the Food Bank serves people in need of food but also provides volunteers with a valuable experience. In Kindle’s words, “[volunteers] get something intangible to feed their souls. Two of the volunteers are 93- and 94-years-old, and they have been volunteering for 30 years.”

*Ferndale Food Bank* distributes food 3 times per week, receiving about 2,000 visits (including duplicate visitors) per month.

*Lynden Project Hope Food Bank* distributes food 3 times per week, serving about 35 families.

*Lummi Food Bank*, on the Lummi Reservation, is open 6 times per week for distribution and serves 180 families each week.

*Nooksack Valley Food Bank* is open for distribution once per week and serves clients in the Nooksack and Everson region.

*Bellingham Southside Food Bank* is housed at the Hillcrest Chapel in South Bellingham and open for distribution the first and third Thursday of each month. It serves about 100 clients during each distribution period.

*Salvation Army Food Bank* in north Bellingham is open for distribution 5 times per week and serves hundreds of clients.

*Foothills Food Bank* is located in Deming and open once per week, distributing food to 130-140 families each week.

*Christ the King Food Bank* is located in the Cascade Business Park on Guide Meridian Road between Smith and Acton Roads (not at the site of the church). It is open for distribution twice per week and serves about 450 clients.

*United Way of Whatcom County* funds programs such as Maple Alley Inn (a hot-meals program), facilitates and funds emergency food and shelter programs, and funds the Bellingham Food Bank and the Food Pantry.

*Opportunity Council’s* role within the emergency food system is to serve hot meals that meet an immediate need and also to facilitate families’ accessing Basic Food assistance. Serving food is a big part of what the Opportunity Council does, but it also connects people with other services that are available.

The Opportunity Council runs 3 programs connected to the emergency food system: Maple Alley Inn; Basic Food Outreach, an outreach program that assists families applying for food stamps and puts them in touch with other services that can make their lives more sustainable; and the Child Care Nutrition Program, which trains child-care providers in nutrition and reimburses them for meals served in their programs.

*Maple Alley Inn* located at the Faith Lutheran Church and is run by the Opportunity Council and serves a hot meal twice per week.

*The Rainbow Center*, in downtown Bellingham, is a recovery center for mentally ill adults, providing hot meals for more than 100 clients each day.
Lighthouse Mission, in downtown Bellingham, is an organization that runs a men’s shelter, a women and children’s shelter, and a special-needs dorm. It serves 3 meals per day for those within the shelters and to the general population; about 100,000 meals are served each year. It also offers services such as mental health counseling, medical consultation, and other counseling services. The number of people coming through the program and to the meals has increased in the last few years.

Church on the Street serves a hot dinner 3 times a week out of its Bellingham location. It also distributes sack lunches, socks, blankets, and other necessities. About 100 meals are served per day.

Salt on the Street, hosted by Cornwall Church Ministries, provides a hot meal once per week to approximately 150 people.

Bellingham Community Meal, hosted by the Church of the Assumption in Bellingham, serves a hot meal once per month to about 700 people. Organizers see a sense of community develop at the meals among clients as well as with the volunteers; it is as much a social gathering as a time to meet the needs of the community.

Ferndale Community Meal Program, based at the United Church of Ferndale; serves a hot dinner twice per month. The congregation also collects non-perishable food items, which are donated to the Ferndale Food Bank. Approximately 100 people are served per meal.

C.A.S.T. (Coffee And Sandwiches on Tuesdays) is held at the Interfaith Health Center in Bellingham, it started as a once-per-week event but now runs 4 days per week. Approximately 150-200 people are served per week, the numbers fluctuating nightly.

Bellingham Senior Center/Whatcom and San Juan County Nutrition Program, runs the “Meals on Wheels” program and also serves a hot lunch 2-5 times per week at meal sites where participants are served together, known as congregate meal sites. Meals on Wheels serves about 750 people each week. The Meals on Wheels program also serves another purpose for the seniors that are visited: drivers monitor the well-being of the clients and alert family members if there is a significant change, as they are often the only regular visitors some seniors have. Congregate meal sites serve about 2,000 meals per week; 190,000 meals were served in 2008.

Soup’s On, located in North Bellingham at the Sterling Drive Church of Christ; serves full, hot meals on Tuesdays and Fridays. The number of people served varies between 45 and 80 per meal. Soup’s On also offers showers and laundry services which, organizers say, draw many people to their program.

Department of Social and Health Services, this Washington State organization runs the Basic Food Program that served 7,862 households in July, 2008, increasing to 11,507 in June of 2009. This program allows people and families in need to spend electronic benefits in their local food stores, thereby creating economic activity for the region and state.

Agape Project is a service project run through the Newman Catholic Campus Ministry at WWU. It includes a food bank distribution held in Lynden every Wednesday for migrant farm workers. During the summer of 2009, over 100 families received food each week. This program may be successful for migrant farm worker families because it is held close to where the families live and because recipients are not asked for identification in order to receive food.

Gaps or remaining needs in the community food system as described by emergency food providers
Managers of emergency food providers were asked about needs or gaps that remained that could strengthen the community food system. Comments included:
• A map showing accessible tree and plant food resources in Whatcom County, along with public outreach to make such free food resources are known.
• Utilizing food waste from restaurants and universities – food is being prepared and thrown away.
• Fresh, healthy, local food is expensive and not affordable for much of the population.
• There is a significant amount of food insecurity in Whatcom County. Publicizing this reality is one of the greatest needs. Such awareness could alert other groups involved in the food industry to the need to divert as much food from the waste stream as possible.
• More resources are required to serve low-income residents.
• A home-delivered food bank is needed for those unable to come to the food bank. WTA personal transport is possible, but some people have trouble navigating the system and find themselves unable to access this service.
• Access to transportation to allow non-driving seniors to access food.
• Funding for emergency food programs; demand has risen nearly 40% in the past two years.
• We need and are working toward more coordination and sharing of resources among emergency food programs. We are working on consolidating food storage and distribution to help supply the food banks in rural areas that don’t have as much access as urban food banks to food donations from big companies.
• Making seniors comfortable enough to ask for help.
• Migrant farm workers have a difficult time gaining access to culturally appropriate, healthy food. In general, they do not feel that they fit in at food banks and are looking for fresh produce that may not be available at these food banks. Many retail grocery stores are not open when farm workers have time to go shopping.
• Facilities, such as community commercial kitchens, where excess produce can be preserved or through which it can be made accessible to people who need it.
• Food preservation networks or programs through which people interested in learning about food preservation can work with each other, existing resources, and appropriate facilities. Whatcom County WSU Extension coordinated a Master Food Preserver Program in 2008 and 2009, but local funding is limited, and the program may be cut in 2010. Development of this or similar programs could help limit food waste and extend the availability of quality food throughout the year.

Food Being Grown for Emergency Food Programs
Several programs in Whatcom County grow and donate food to food banks, hot meal programs, and transitional housing programs. The programs include entire farms, parts of community gardens, church gardens, gleaning, and farmer donations.

Food to Bank On
This farmer-incubation and training program is run by Sustainable Connections. In it, new farmers are provided with resources and training and are matched with mentor farmers in order to develop their farming and business management skills. They are also paid wholesale market value for farm products they deliver weekly to food banks and hunger-relief agencies throughout the County. A total of 20 beginning farmers have been supported, and over $50,000 worth of farm-fresh food has been delivered to food banks since 2003.

Small Potatoes Gleaning Project
The Bellingham Food Bank runs this project with support from Growing Washington. It has existed since 1999 with
various non-profit organizations providing sponsorship. The Gleaning Project coordinates volunteers to harvest leftover produce from farmers’ fields, the Bellingham Farmers Market, and home gardens for delivery to food banks and emergency meal programs throughout Whatcom County. In 2009, the amount of produce harvested was 135,129 pounds: 101,554 pounds from farm fields, 14,733 pounds from farmers market retrieval, and 18,842 pounds from home gardens. Thirty-two farms participated in 2009 and 1,309.5 volunteer hours were clocked to help with gleaning and distribution. Food from the Gleaning Project went to 27 sites throughout the County.

*The Bellingham Food Bank Food Bank Farm*

This project is jointly run by Growing Washington and the Bellingham Food Bank. It started in 2007 and has expanded each year, with nearly $70,000 worth of produce donated to the Food Bank in 2009. Many volunteers, including children from school, recreational, and County programs, are integral to production of the food.

*Farm to Food Bank*

The Bellingham Food Bank runs this program, started in 2009, which contracts with local farms to grow food for Whatcom County food banks using funding from Washington State and the Whatcom Community Foundation’s Sustainable Whatcom Fund. Farmers are paid wholesale market prices for their products. Growing Washington coordinated this project locally; three identical projects ran in other areas of Washington State.

*Just Food CSA*

Growing Washington runs this project, which finds supporters to purchase CSA shares to be donated to individuals chosen by those sponsors. The CSA shares come from the Growing Whatcom CSA (a retail farm CSA program run by Growing Washington). Twenty-five shares were donated in 2008. This program is completely reliant on sponsorship from individuals and groups.

*Friendship Community Garden*

This garden is run under the umbrella of the Ferndale Service Community Cooperative. It has several community garden plots as well as a “giving garden” plot where food is produced for the Ferndale Food Bank. In 2008, 423 pounds of food were delivered to the Ferndale Food Bank.

*Bellingham Urban Garden Syndicate (BUGS)*

This organization encourages urban farming and currently runs 10 gardens in Bellingham that are maintained by volunteers. Work parties are held where volunteers can work in exchange for produce. BUGS organizes an Urban Farmer Series, bringing in mainly local farmers to teach classes on food production. BUGS is also developing an urban fruit tree stewardship and harvest program.

*Home, Community, and School Gardens*

With the emergence of the trend to eat locally grown and raised food, with economic pressures of the recent months and years, and with issues of food safety in the media, more people are looking to grow their own food. For many, this means home vegetable and fruit gardens; for others, this means using community gardens where individuals or families can use a plot of land to grow food.

*Home Food Gardens*

Growing food in a home garden can range from using a few pots for growing tomatoes or herbs to using the entire yard to grow fruit and vegetables. Since home food gardens can be so varied, they are very difficult to measure.

In May 2008, students from a WWU Anthropology class set up a “dot survey” at the Bellingham Farmers Market and at a book reading by Mark Winne, author of *The Food Gap*. On both occasions, all participants were
volunteers and were not singled out on account of their affiliation with the event. The students asked 5 multiple-choice questions, and participants were able to answer by placing dots in the appropriate category on flip charts. One of the questions asked was, “Do you grow your own food?” At the Farmers Market survey, 55% answered “yes,” and at the book reading, 83% answered “yes.” Participants were also asked about what they grow and how they grow it. At both venues, most home gardeners grew vegetables, and many produced fruit. At their homes, most grew their food in the ground (versus containers or at a community garden).

These results are not statistically significant, but they do give a snapshot of the food-growing practices of people who visit these events.

**Community and School Gardens in Whatcom County**

Below is a description of current community gardens in Whatcom County. These are divided into four sections:

- Community gardens
- Public school gardens
- Western Washington University gardens
- Transitional housing gardens

The number of community gardens in Whatcom County has grown over the past few years, and new gardens are continually being developed. Community gardens are located on public land, church property, and homeowner property, and are managed in various ways. Some community gardens have well-documented rules, and others are managed loosely by a group of families living close to the garden.

No formal community garden system exists in Whatcom County, although there are a few organizations that give support to more than one garden, such as Community First! Gardens, a program of WSU Whatcom County Extension. Some gardens incorporate growing plots used for donation to local food banks. Some homeowner community gardens are planted and open for neighbors to tend and harvest. Community garden sizes range from a few plots for a few families to over 50 plots for community members from a range of neighborhoods.

**Community Gardens Publically Managed**

Blaine and Birch Bay

- The Blaine Community/Senior Center. G Street between 7th and 8th Streets. This site has hosted a community garden in the past, but it is currently in transition
- A new community garden has been started in Birch Bay.

Bellingham

Bellingham Department of Parks and Recreation manages 3 community gardens with a total of 206 plots. Each garden has its own coordinator who works with the Department.

- Happy Valley Garden. 32nd Street between Taylor Avenue and Donovan Avenue. Organic, year-round, owned by the City of Bellingham.
- Fairhaven Garden. 10th Street and Wilson Avenue. Organic, year-round, leased from a private owner.
- Lakeway Garden. Lakeway Drive and Woburn Street Seasonal (May 1-October 1), owned by the City of Bellingham.
Sumas
The City of Sumas Parks Department coordinates a one-acre garden with 20 plots, located at 399 Frost Rodeo Drive, in H. Bowen Memorial Park. Residents of nearby apartment buildings are the primary users of the garden, which is very loosely managed and has grown in size by word of mouth.

Ferndale
Friendship Community Garden. Cherry Street, between Cherry and the PUD station. 18 beds of fruits and vegetables fed over 60 people in 2008. There is also a children’s garden used by the Boys and Girls Club and a giving garden from which food is donated to the Ferndale Food Bank.

Community Gardens on Church Property

- Immanuel Lutheran Church. 5782 Lawrence Road, Everson. This church grows a garden for the Kendall Food Bank and Maple Alley Inn, a hot meal emergency food provider in Bellingham.
- First Christian Church. 495 E. Bakerview Road, at Deemer Road, Bellingham. Started in 2007 for the use of nearby neighbors in apartment buildings and for growing vegetables to be donated to the food bank. There is a lot of space at this garden, and it is not currently full.
- Congregation Beth Israel Synagogue. Broadway/Lettered Streets Neighborhood, intersection of J and Irving Streets, Bellingham. Beth Israel has plans to increase organization/control of the garden, but they encourage neighbors to continue using it. A portion of this garden is facilitated by the Bellingham Urban Garden Syndicate (BUGS).
- Sterling Drive Church of Christ. 558 Sterling Drive, Bellingham. The Sterling Pas Garden was developed to provide fresh organic vegetables for Sterling Neighborhood families (many of which are connected to farm work) and church members, and as a space for neighbors to meet and work together. No individual plots are available, but sections can be adopted for tending. In 2009, the garden space was about 45' by 85' and 14 rows were planted with various vegetables. Neighbor families harvested throughout the summer and early fall; garden events were held for start-up work, mid-way harvest/weeding, and education. In 2009, the Small Potatoes Gleaning Project harvested 400 lbs. for area food banks.
- Third Christian Reformed Church. 514 Liberty Street, Lynden. Five Loaves Farm. Members garden on 3,300 square feet and produce is donated to the Lynden area food banks. They also manage a food bank farm at Christian Health Care Center in Lynden; some of this food goes to the residents of the center. This project is sponsored by A Rocha, a faith-based organization.
- United Methodist Church. Main and 14th Streets, Lynden. 15-20 garden spaces for individuals or families to grow food. Organizers hope to have room for more plots in the future. A hoop house is also available.
- Sonlight Community Christian Reformed Church. North City Community Garden, Aaron Drive, Lynden. Built in 2009 with 20-25 plots for community members as well as community plots for potatoes, corn, and squash.
- Duffner Court Trailer Park. Front Street, Lynden. Has about 10 individual plots and a community corn plot. This garden is being assisted by the Third Christian Reformed Church.

Community Gardens at Private Residences (Privately Managed)

- West residence garden located in Bellingham at the residence of Megan West. This 10-bed garden started in about 2002 and works with kindergarten classes at Sunnyland Elementary School. Students help to plant vegetables in the spring and come back in the fall to harvest. Ms. West also has neighbors join in harvesting, and one neighbor tends her own plot. There are plans to build a cold frame to add to the educational experience for the school children.
• Shuravloff residence garden located in Bellingham, at the residence of Trudy and John Shuravloff. This garden has 8 beds and is used by neighbors in the surrounding apartments. Excess vegetables are put out for neighbors to take. Neighbors are also invited to help in the tending and harvest of vegetables planted by the Shuravloffs.

• Miller garden, located in Bellingham, at the residence of Baron Miller. Four or five people in neighboring residences participate in this garden. Mr. Miller is a minister at the Roosevelt Community Church; he built the garden and invited neighbors to participate.

• Parker residence, located in Bellingham, at the residence of Stan Parker. There are about 5 families who use this garden; it is loosely organized and very cooperative. Mr. Parker organizes the beds and coordinates with neighbors to use the garden.

• I and Jenkins Streets. 5 gardeners, representing 4 households, garden on half of a small Bellingham city lot. This garden was in hiatus for the 2009 season.

Community-Managed Gardens on Private Land

- Cordata Community Gardens. Northern end of Cordata Parkway. Garden has 50 raised bed plots and was started in 2009 with support from the Community First! Gardens Program run by WSU Extension and funded by the Mary Redman Foundation.

- Broadway Youth Center. Corner of Dupont and Broadway Streets, Bellingham, on the property of the Broadway Youth Center. 18 plots rented and tended by neighborhood families.

Community Gardens in Housing Complexes

- Spring Creek Apartment. 196 E. Kellogg Road, Bellingham. 15 families have used this raised-bed vegetable garden since 1990.

- Old Mill Apartment. 2100 Electric Avenue, Bellingham. For the use of residents of the apartment complex.

Community Gardens in Development

Birchwood Neighborhood, Bellingham, has formed a committee called “Birchwood Community Victory Gardens” with the goal of developing a community garden in the neighborhood. Potential sites include Birchwood Elementary School grounds, adjacent to the school garden, or on nearby church property.

Sudden Valley Neighborhood, Bellingham, is planning a 100’ x 100’ garden to open in May 2010.

Everson, has a half-acre community garden, located across the street from the library, on Kirsch Road, in Everson. There are currently 8 plots that are being gardened by families and food is grown on the rest of the land for the Nooksack Valley Food Bank.

Maple Falls, located on Mt. Baker Highway, this garden consists of raised beds made from alder trees, and large barrels used to grow potatoes and tomatoes. A compost bin is shared with the neighboring coffee shop and bakery.

School Gardens

Gardens are also being built in several schools throughout the County. While these may not supply a large
quantity of food for a community, they expose children to the science, art, and skill of growing vegetables and give them a taste of fresh produce. Teachers are incorporating gardens into the curricula of almost all classroom subjects. For a number of reasons, including lack of processing capacity and health regulations, food from school gardens cannot currently be served in school cafeterias. However, students growing food are allowed to eat produce they have grown if they harvest it directly from the garden.

Formed in 2008 as a project of Common Threads Farm, the Whatcom County School Garden Collective is a group of teachers and local food advocates working to start school gardens and introduce students to the nutritional and educational opportunities of food gardening.

New school gardens are being added each year and the success of these gardens depends on the involvement of teachers and parents. Gardens vary in what they offer: from one to several raised beds, perennial fruit production, winter production, greenhouses. School gardens that were known in 2010 are listed below.

Bellingham School District
Elementary schools: Geneva, Wade King, Alderwood, Birchwood, Columbia, Parkview, and Roosevelt
Middle schools: Shuksan and Fairhaven
High school: Squalicum
Private schools: Assumption Catholic and Cedartree Montessori
Ferndale School District: Beach Elementary
Lummi Nation: Lummi Nation School
Mount Baker School District: Kendall Elementary School

Western Washington University Gardens
Western Washington University has gardening locations for students and staff. Gardens on campus offer a variety of opportunities to meet the individual’s interest.

Four main garden projects are run through Fairhaven College’s ‘The Outback Farm Gardens’: The Community Garden, the Market Garden, the Herb Garden, and the Forest Garden. They are maintained and coordinated by students and are popular with students and staff. Some classes have activities in the gardens for coursework.

The Community Garden is comprised of roughly 40 small plots, available to students, staff, and faculty, available on a first-come, first-served basis and free of charge. To be eligible for a plot, individuals must commit to tending it throughout the summer or else have a plan to pass on responsibility to a known party. No prior gardening experience is necessary and experimentation (so long as it is organic) is encouraged.

The Market/Educational Garden is an experiment in practical, bio-intensive organic growing. Harvested produce is sold to faculty and staff at Fairhaven College and on the WWU campus and is also donated to the Bellingham Food Bank.

The Herb Garden is located at the entrance to the Outback Farm. A variety of perennial and annual herbs are grown, planted in plots according to their uses: flu and cold remedies, culinary uses, nervines, and women’s herbs.

The Forest Garden is located at the southeast corner of the Outback Farm. This long-term installation of various fruit trees and berry plants uses permaculture and biodynamic growing techniques.
Transitional Housing Facilities Gardens
These are gardens for the current residents of facilities. A member of the staff or an outside garden coordinator manages most of these gardens, and residents are encouraged to help with the garden and enjoy the harvest.

Lydia Place Garden has 8 raised beds for vegetables, one 9’-wide, 3-tiered octagonal herb bed, and several fruit trees. The 6 to 8 resident families help with all aspects of garden prep, planting, maintenance, and harvest in 3 month-long sessions; some residents volunteer to care for the garden between sessions. A garden coordinator from WSU Whatcom County Extension works with the residents and conducts garden activities 3 evenings a month during the summer: one with women, one with children, and one with families. These activities give the residents skills to start their own gardens, whether in the ground or in containers, once they transition to their new homes.

YWCA Garden is coordinated by the YWCA’s operations manager. The garden is informally organized and is run to provide food for residents. Community volunteers and residents plant and tend the garden. They focus on growing vegetables that require little maintenance, water, and time. The operations manager will harvest vegetables and leave them in the “free area” of the food supplies so that residents may take what they need.

Dorothy Place Garden has a small garden available for use by residents. Currently, only one resident is using the garden; she coordinates with the operations manager of the YWCA to share seeds and starts.

Conclusion
This chapter paints a complex picture of the many sources from which Whatcom County residents acquire food. It also addresses accessibility of food for residents of Whatcom County and the challenges that exist in some areas on account of poverty and the availability of food stores. It highlights a growing trend of farms marketing their products directly, thereby retaining full retail value for their efforts, and a fast-growing movement among schools and emergency food systems to prioritize local food sources.

Of note among major trends discussed in this chapter are the following:

Food Sales
Whatcom County residents spend approximately $643 million on food every year; the majority of that money is spent at grocery stores, although restaurants make up a large portion as well. Food money spent directly with local farms is increasing greatly but still makes up only a small percentage of total food spending.

• 18% of Whatcom County farms engage in direct-to-consumer marketing of some kind. That number has grown by 44% in Whatcom County since 2002.
• Sales volume from farmer-direct marketing totaled almost $4 million in 2007, an increase of 94% since 2002.
• Access to food in Whatcom County is affected by many factors. Principal among them are:
  - Whether food stores are located long distances from population centers (by car) or if they are near public transportation.
  - The poverty of citizens, 14.7% of whom fall below federal poverty guidelines.
Farm-to-School

- Food service providers at institutions struggle to get the best products for consumers at the lowest price; many count purchasing from local farms as a benefit to their missions but often cannot justify it financially.

- Institutional food service providers cite several challenges to working with local food:
  - Lack of facilities for processing.
  - Delivery capacity of local farms.
  - Seasonal availability of produce.
  - Food safety liability.

- Of positive note is the work that schools throughout the County have done to increase their local food purchasing from farm cooperatives and their food recycling through composting services.

The Emergency Food System

- The number of client visits to Whatcom County food banks rose by 39% from 2007 to 2009. 35% of Bellingham Food Bank clients are children, and 16% are seniors.

- Emergency food programs are increasing efforts to provide food from Whatcom County sources in order to be more self-supporting and to increase the freshness and health of the food distributed. Such initiatives include gleaning from local farms, supporting the training of new farmers interested in helping those in need, and actually growing food that will go directly to clients.

- An increasing number of individuals in Whatcom County are using community gardens and the opportunity to grow their own food.

Information about food sales, farm marketing trends, the emergency food system, and efforts to increase our community’s food self-sufficiency gives us a lot to go on when we look at areas in which our local food system is improving as well as opportunities that exist to make it stronger. The vast number of ways in which farms can sell products directly makes it very difficult for researchers to track exactly which methods work best. Each farm is different and what works for one may not work for another.

A great deal of further development is possible with regard to farms filling the increasing institutional demand for locally produced food. Initial successes have been seen with smaller farms joining together to supply large quantities of products to institutions, which allows more Whatcom County residents to eat locally produced food. Significant opportunity for innovation within this sector calls for further study and for the creation or re-focusing of existing agricultural businesses.

Food access is a significant challenge for many individuals and families in Whatcom County, based both upon geographic location and poverty. Maps created to show access to food stores throughout Whatcom County provide the basis for continued study into which geographic regions of the County are in need of the greatest support for accessing healthy food. This baseline data suggests areas of opportunity for food businesses and for transportation planners who look at the overall geographic dispersal of a population and the satisfaction of basic needs for those elements of the population that are nutritionally disadvantaged. Of particular note are the regions of eastern Whatcom County, which have both transportation challenges and some of the highest levels of poverty.

A great deal of opportunity exists for grassroots collaboration among organizations and individuals working with the emerging home and community garden movement. As efforts to develop community gardens, emergency
food gardens, and other resources for food self-sufficiency grow in number, Whatcom County will benefit from expanded coordination of those resources.

Whatcom County does not presently have a single organization or entity that counts within its mission the development of or focus upon local food policy or organizing across the spectrum of food issues (farm sales, farmland preservation, hunger, food access, garden education, etc.). Conclusions from this CFA as a whole may help to define the need for a new entity whose focus will be exactly that, or it may help to define challenge areas in which existing organizations can collaborate to enact positive change.

---


ii Data collected from LexisNexis Academic Website.


iv Data from Bellingham Farmers Market (personal communication).

v Data from Census of Agriculture: [http://www.agcensus.usda.gov](http://www.agcensus.usda.gov)

vi Ibid.

vii Ibid.


ix Whatcom Community Foundation: Whatcom Farm to School Program: [http://whatcomcf.org/Farm_to_School2.html](http://whatcomcf.org/Farm_to_School2.html)

x Seth Vidaña, Office of Sustainability at Western Washington University (personal communication, March 29, 2010).

xi For more on poverty guideline information for Whatcom County, see Chapter 2 of this CFA.


xiii Note: for information about Five Loaves Farm, visit: [http://fiveloavesfarm.blogspot.com](http://fiveloavesfarm.blogspot.com)

xiv Note: for information about the Whatcom County School Garden Collective, visit: [http://www.commonthreadsfarm.org/content/view/22/36](http://www.commonthreadsfarm.org/content/view/22/36)