



April 2024

E-Harvest Newsletter

A Message from Commissioner Miller

Howdy Neighbors! Welcome to Your E-Harvest Newsletter.



This month I invite you to join me in celebrating the first-ever Texas Fruit and Vegetable Day on Friday, April 5, 2024. The 88th Texas Legislature established this day of recognition to encourage consumption of fruits and vegetables in public schools. On Texas Fruit and Vegetable Day I am asking my valued TDA partners in school nutrition to serve seasonal produce from Texas and remind students that a balanced meal with local fruits and vegetables will help them feel better, learn faster, and grow stronger. Remember friends ... Texas Agriculture Matters!

Sid Miller

Texas Agriculture Commissioner

MegaCon

MegaCon is right around the corner! TDA's annual training and networking event for federal nutrition-program partners will take place from **May 14 – 16** at the AT&T Hotel and Conference Center in Austin. The conference focuses on training and policy updates for National School Lunch Program (NSLP) and Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) providers and food

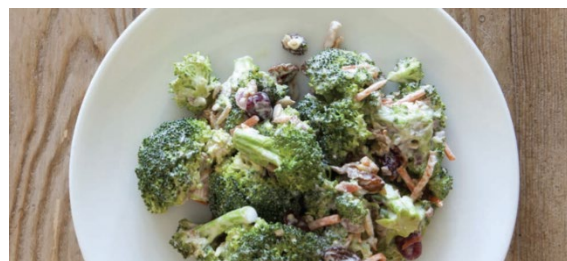
banks operating household program. Attendees will enjoy exhibits and resource tables, fun and games, and an awards ceremony you won't want to miss. Registration is getting close to full. If you received recognition for Farm Fresh Challenge, Pear-fection, USDA Foods Challenge, Healthy Meals Incentives, Turnip the Beet, or Administrative Review No Findings, you will be included in the awards ceremony. If you have not registered and are an awardee, please contact us at FarmFresh@TexasAgriculture.gov so we can ensure space for your attendance. Find more information here: SquareMeals.org/MegaCon

TDA's Farm Fresh team has two sessions planned for MegaCon this year. The first session will include a brief Farm Fresh Foundations informational presentation followed by feedback from CEs who are active in Farm Fresh activities. The second session will include a Farm Fresh Panel and Roundtable Discussion. In this session, Contracting Entities (CEs) from around the state will discuss earning Farm Fresh Challenge recognition;; using Farm Fresh ingredients; partnering with local producers; and cultivating a school garden. If you have questions you would like the panelists to answer, please submit them prior to MegaCon using this form: [FF MegaCon Roundtable Question Form](#). Roundtable topics will focus on specific aspects of Farm Fresh activities. All questions and responses will be recorded and compiled into an FAQ to be posted on SquareMeals after MegaCon. Questions not answered during the session will be included in the FAQ.

Farm Fresh Schools

Harvest of the Month Recipe

Every month, the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) spotlights a fruit or vegetable currently being harvested in Texas. April's Harvest of the Month is broccoli. For a cool



spring side dish, try this recipe from TDA's Farm Fresh Cooking for the Seasons recipe book: [Crunchy Broccoli Salad](#)

May Harvest of the Month: Blueberries

Funding/Donation Opportunities

Fruit Tree Planting Foundation

The [Fruit Tree Planting Foundation](#) offers orchards of fruit trees to eligible applicants. Grant winners receive 15 – 20 fruit trees, planning and design assistance, training for tree care and necessary manuals. Applications are always open, and awards are given as time permits.

Learning Opportunities

Growing Minds

Looking for ways to incorporate Farm to School into your program? Growing Minds has [110 ways to do so!](#) From cooking seasonal recipes and reading agricultural books to planting mystery seeds and organizing garden-based scavenger hunts, they've got you covered.

Local Food for Schools (LFS) Office Hours

The next LFS office hours meeting is scheduled for April 10, 2024, from 3-4 p.m. CST; grant recipients will receive the zoom link via email and LFS monthly e-blast. If you'd like to view the recorded sessions and slides from March's office hours, please visit the [LFS webpage](#). If you are participating in the LFS grant and are not receiving communications, contact localfoodgrant@texasagriculture.gov.

Farm Fresh Sharing

Farm Fresh Sharing is an E-Harvest feature spotlighting Contracting Entities (CEs) from Texas and across the country who take part in farm to school activities and answer questions from you. If you are interested in sharing your experiences and inspiring other CEs, please fill out this [survey](#).

This month Farm Fresh Sharing features Lumberton ISD, a small district that serves free breakfast to all students eligible for free or reduced-price meals this year. The 88th Texas Legislature approved funding that enables schools to serve free breakfasts to students eligible for reduced-price school meals.

Q: How often do you serve local foods in your cafeterias?

A: We are fortunate to serve local milk daily. We serve local fruits and veggies pretty routinely.



Q: Have you noticed an increase in meal participation and higher opinions about school meals since you began serving local foods?

A: The students get excited when they hear what they're eating is local and fresh!

Q: What TDA resources, other than the Farm Fresh Network map, have you used to help you with Farm Fresh Programming?

A: We applied/opted in for the Local Food for Schools Grant, which we are incredibly excited to participate in! We use lots of TDA's resources on our social media to help educate and get the word out to our community, including the Harvest of the Month printable posters, Farm Fresh Challenge stickers, window clings, printables, and activity packets for students.

Q: What inspired you to start Farm Fresh Programming?

A: Anything we can do to promote healthy eating and support our local community simultaneously is a win! It's a no-brainer. Honestly, the students love it, especially when we participate in the Farm Fresh Challenge during the month of October and have taste tests and other engaging activities!

Q: Have you or are you able to support other districts with implementation of Farm Fresh Programming? (Support includes mentoring, sharing information, answering questions, etc.)

A: Region 5 is a fantastic region to be in and we are all very collaborative. I have been able to share many fun ideas with colleagues, as well as learning a ton from them, too!

Q: Are any of your local producers a part of the Farm Fresh Network?

A: Yes! Southeast Texas Olive, Doguet's Rice Milling Company, and Johnny Jennings Farm just to name a few!

Q: How long have you been participating in Farm Fresh Programming?

A: I became Child Nutrition Director for our district just last year. I jumped right in, and participated and was able to learn and do more this year. I look forward to this yearly.

Q: Do you use TDA's mapping tool on SquareMeals?

A: Yes, I utilize TDA's Farm Fresh Producers Map. Our Region is also very collaborative and shares what they find and are using as well, which is super helpful.

Q: Do you have a garden?

A: Not currently, but this is a part of my 5-year goal plan! I would love to one day!



Q: What kind of educational activities have you been able to implement as part of or related to the Farm Fresh Initiative?

A: I have found that students absolutely love participating in taste tests! One of their favorites this year was the taste testing of the fruit-infused waters. Not only did it engage our students in a fun activity, but it also educated them about healthier beverage options. By introducing fruit-infused waters as an alternative to sugary drinks, you're promoting better nutrition and hydration habits among students. This was a huge success, and the students thoroughly enjoyed it.

Q: What advice would you give a CE trying to decide if/how to participate in Farm Fresh programming?

A: Just do it! It's fun and rewarding for both your staff and students.

Farm Fresh Childcare Finding New Recipes

Broccoli is one of the vegetables that kids either love or hate. Try a new way to encourage your preschoolers to eat broccoli by turning it into [Cheesy Broccoli Tots](#). The recipe from National CACFP Sponsors Association combines



mashed potatoes, broccoli, and cheese into a delicious, more nutritious tater tot.

Funding/Donation Opportunities

Kids Garden Month

Every April, KidsGardening.org hosts their Kids Garden Month Contest. This year, the theme is What do You Love About Gardening? Participants can submit entries on the [Kids Garden Month](#) page, where descriptions of what constitutes an entry can be found. Random winners will be chosen once a week and ten grand prizes will be chosen and announced **May 22**.

Learning Opportunities

Growminds.org has compiled lesson plans, activities, recipes, and reading suggestions into an “I Tried Local” [toolkit](#). The toolkit is available in both English and Spanish and is free to download. This curriculum can be used alone or in conjunction with their “[Farm to Preschool](#)” toolkit.

Farm Fresh Producer

Texas Fruit and Vegetable Month/Day



In 2007, The Texas legislature declared April as Texas Fruit and Vegetable Month to help increase fruit and vegetable consumption across the state. In November of 2023, the legislature went even further by designating the first Friday in April as Texas Fruit and Vegetable Day. Thank you to our Texas farmers for growing fresh fruits and vegetables. Let’s all celebrate with a plate full of fresh healthy fruits and vegetables!

Learning Opportunities

If you need some help figuring out how to get started supplying local schools with your products, National Farm to School Network has a list of [case studies](#) from farmers and ranchers across the country who have successfully partnered with schools in their areas.

Farm to School Opportunities

Texas Schools are Looking for Texas Farmers!

Join Farm Fresh Network (FFN)

TDA is encouraging schools to use the [Farm Fresh Network](#) as a resource to find local producers to increase the amount of Texas foods on school meal trays and connect schools to Texas agriculture. If you are currently registered in the TDA's [Farm Fresh Network](#), please take moment to review and update your information. Schools are reaching out now and we want to ensure they have the correct information to contact you. If you are not a member yet, please join [here](#). *If you need to make changes to your FFN information, please contact farmfresh@texasagriculture.gov.*

TDA's Texas Farm Fresh Initiative

Help Cultivate a Farm Fresh Generation

The Farm Fresh Initiative is a movement started by Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller to cultivate a Farm Fresh generation by connecting local schools with Texas agriculture. When Texans support Texans we all win. Visit www.squaremeals.org/TexasFarmFresh for more information and learn how you can get involved in the Texas Fresh Initiative!

Farm Fresh Producer Survey

Help TDA determine the amount of Farm to School purchasing reaching local producers and how we can increase Farm to School sales for Texas producers. Please fill out the short survey here: [Farm Fresh Producer Survey](#)

Farm Fresh Families

Getting to Know School Meals



It's time to test your knowledge of what goes into school meals.

Find USDA quizzes about school meals here: [Quizzes](#)

Need a refresher? Check out this [article](#) from the Food Research & Action Center (FRAC).

Find some fun activities to enhance your children's knowledge of nutritious foods here: [Grocery Store Treasure Hunt](#), [Grocery Store Bingo](#), [Look and Cook Recipes](#). Look for an indicator that the products you're searching for were grown or produced in Texas and ask your kid(s) if they know of any local foods served at school.

Farm Fresh Back to Basics

Farm Fresh Surveys

TDA has created a short (5–10 minutes) survey to help inform support for Farm Fresh programming in schools and childcare settings. This year's survey has been revamped to be less time consuming for CEs to complete and is for all child nutrition operators. It will help determine the resources needed to increase Farm Fresh activities and purchasing. The survey responses also will provide information that measures participation in Farm Fresh programming. Respondents can remain anonymous. Please take a few minutes to complete the form here: [Farm Fresh Survey '24](#)

Questions

Do you have Farm to School questions or subjects you'd like to learn more about? Submit this [form](#) to possibly have them answered/discussed in future E-Harvest issues.

Texas Farm Fresh Network



TDA is pleased to welcome the following producers to the Farm Fresh Network:

Contact TDA

Email: FarmFresh@TexasAgriculture.gov
Toll Free: (877) TEX-MEAL

Connect with Others

Texas Farm Fresh Network:

Use this tool to connect with Texas food companies that currently sell or are interested in selling to schools, childcare centers, adult care centers and summer meal programs. Company listings include contact information, product availability and distribution radius.

Funding Opportunities:

Financial support from organizations may help establish or advance local Farm Fresh initiatives. This list includes opportunities from TDA, USDA and other organizations.

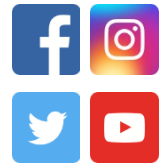
Interested in learning more about Texas products?

Sign up for the *Go Local. GO TEXAN E-zine* today.



TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
COMMISSIONER SID MILLER

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