



February 2024 E-Harvest Newsletter

A Message from Commissioner Miller

Howdy Neighbors! Welcome to Your E-Harvest Newsletter.



February is the time to cultivate good nutrition with plans for a spring garden. Get the soil ready and visit a local nursery for information about what you should plant. There's still time to buy seeds and get them ready to plant when the weather's right. Your garden may be small, but it's agriculture, and remember ... Texas Agriculture Matters!

Sid Miller

Texas Agriculture Commissioner

Farm Fresh Schools

TDA's Farm Fresh Cooking for the Seasons Recipe Book

Every month, the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) spotlights a fruit or vegetable currently being harvested in Texas. February's Harvest of the Month is Red Leaf Lettuce. Lettuces can be used in dishes other than salad, like this [Purple Power Bean Wrap](#).



March Harvest of the Month: Mushrooms

Funding/Donation Opportunities

Garden Grant Program

It is time for the Whole Kids Foundation's [Garden Grant Program](#) again. This grant provides \$3,000 to schools and nonprofits for implementation or support of an existing school garden. Deadline for applications is **March 1**.

ALDI Cares

If you live in one of the 126 communities in Texas where an ALDI is located, apply for one of their [ALDI Cares Community Grants](#). Though the grants are small (\$250 - \$5,000), they can be used for projects that combat food insecurity and promote children's health and wellness. Applications are open from **February 1 – December 15** each year.

Learning Opportunities

Prepare Gardens for Spring Planting

The [El Paso County Master Gardeners](#) have some great tips for getting your garden beds ready for spring planting. Their tips include weeding out plants you don't want, adding compost to your soil, and a creative way to protect your young tomato transplants.

Farm Fresh Sharing

Farm Fresh Sharing is a feature where we spotlight Contracting Entities (CEs) from Texas and across the country who take part in farm to school activities and answer questions from you. The goal of this section is to make connections between CEs and producers, answer questions about Farm Fresh programming, and share success stories. If you are interested in sharing your experiences and inspiring other CEs, please fill out this [survey](#).

It's February and that means we will begin monthly CE profiles! The Farm Fresh Challenge provided an exciting number of stories and activities that prompted TDA to reach out to CEs about being profiled. The responses were enthusiastic and plentiful enough to provide monthly profiles for the

rest of the year and into next year. With that said, let's kick off the monthly spotlights with Rio Grande City Grulla ISD (RGCGISD).



A TDA representative visited RGCGISD during the Farm Fresh Challenge to observe the Southwest Dairy Mobile Dairy classroom at Alto Bonito Elementary School. The passion for serving students fresh, local foods was unmistakable and palpable. Let's start sharing their Farm Fresh Spotlight.

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

A: We serve local foods regularly in our cafeterias. Specifically, we provide local milk sourced from Texas on a daily basis, as it is both produced and processed within the state.

Q: What TDA resources have you used to help you with Farm Fresh programming?

A: In addition to the Farm Fresh Network map, we've utilized various TDA resources for our Farm Fresh Programming. These include Texas produce flash cards, "Unscramble the Texas Grown Produce," OLE! Texas plant cards, posting the Harvest of the Month on social media, employing the social media toolkit, using PR templates, and featuring "We Serve Local" stickers.

Q: What inspired you to start Farm Fresh programming?

A: We initiated Farm Fresh programming with a strong commitment to supporting local farms. Our inspiration stems from recognizing the numerous benefits associated with sourcing locally. By minimizing handling and processing, we contribute to environmental sustainability, reduce shipping charges, and prioritize freshness. This initiative serves not only as a practical choice but also as an educational tool for students, imparting the significance of supporting local businesses and demonstrating that, despite our large production scale, we deeply value the importance of community and fresh, quality products.

Q: What motivates you to continue and expand your current Farm Fresh efforts?

A: Our ongoing motivation to continue and expand our Farm Fresh efforts is fueled by a dual commitment to environmental sustainability and cost-effectiveness. By prioritizing locally sourced produce, we actively contribute to reducing environmental harm associated with long-distance transportation and excessive processing. Simultaneously, expanding these efforts allows us to optimize costs associated with imports. This two-fold approach aligns with our broader goal of fostering a more sustainable and economically efficient food sourcing strategy.

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: Yes, we are committed to supporting other districts with the implementation of Farm Fresh programming. We believe in collaboration, sharing ideas, and networking to collectively strengthen the adoption of locally sourced initiatives. If other districts express interest or seek guidance, we are more than willing to share our experiences, best practices, and insights. By fostering a collaborative environment, we aim to contribute to the broader success of Farm Fresh programming and promote the benefits of supporting local producers in school nutrition.

Q: Is there any other information you think would be helpful for other CEs to know?

A: It's essential for other CEs to prioritize marketing to students, creating awareness about the benefits of locally sourced items. Establishing partnerships with organizations like the Southwest Dairy Classroom or the Texas AgriLife Extension Office can enhance educational initiatives. Additionally, building networks with vendors supportive of nutrition education ensures a holistic approach to promoting healthy eating habits among students.

Q: What is your students' favorite local product that is part of a menu item?

A: Among their favorites are the tamales processed in San Antonio, which carry a



distinctive regional flavor. Additionally, our students thoroughly enjoy flautas and enchiladas, where the tortillas are sourced from Exquisita Tortillas in Edinburg, our sister city. These culturally accepted foods not only contribute to a diverse and flavorful menu but also celebrate the culinary heritage of our region, creating a connection to local traditions that resonates well with our students.

Q: Do you have a garden?

A: Currently, we don't have a garden, but we are interested in establishing one for the campuses. The key obstacle we face is the need for resources to initiate and sustain these gardens. We recognize the value of having on-site gardens, not only for fostering a connection to locally sourced produce but also as educational tools for students. We are actively seeking support and resources to kickstart this initiative and create sustainable, educational green spaces across our campuses.

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

A: As part of our Farm Fresh Initiative, we have successfully incorporated educational activities to enhance students' understanding of agriculture. One notable initiative involves our collaboration with the Southwest Dairy Mobile Classroom. This program provides an immersive, hands-on experience for children, allowing them to get up close with various aspects of agriculture. The events are thoughtfully designed to offer a comprehensive insight into local agriculture, covering topics such as dairy farms, cattle industry practices, cotton growing, and even cheese-making. By engaging in these interactive activities, students not only learn about the diverse facets of agriculture but also develop a deeper appreciation for the importance of locally sourced products and sustainable farming practices.

Q: How do you promote the local products you use?

A: We actively promote the local products we use through multiple channels. Social media serves as a dynamic platform where we showcase the origin and benefits of our locally sourced items, engaging our audience with visuals and information. Additionally, we distribute handouts and

bookmarks that highlight the significance of supporting local producers. These tangible resources provide a quick reference for our community, reinforcing the message of the value derived from choosing local products. Through this multi-pronged approach, we aim to create awareness and appreciation for the quality and impact of the locally sourced items in our offerings.

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

A: For a CE considering participation in Farm Fresh Programming, my advice would be to actively engage with vendors during events like the Region One South Texas Co-op or TASN (Texas Association for School Nutrition) Expo and prioritize asking a key question: inquire about the origin of their products and whether they are sourced from Texas.

By specifically asking vendors if their products are from Texas, you are emphasizing the importance of local sourcing. This not only aligns with the Farm Fresh Initiative but also ensures that the products meet your criteria for supporting local businesses and minimizing environmental impact.

Additionally, consider discussing other relevant factors such as supply chain transparency, product quality, and any additional support or educational resources the vendor may provide. This approach allows you to make well-informed decisions that align with your institution's values and goals for promoting locally sourced items.

Farm Fresh Childcare Finding New Recipes

Is there a way to serve salad that gets children excited to eat it? Yes! Whole Kids Foundation has a recipe for [Salad Kabobs](#) – a fantastic, fun way to serve this month's delicious Harvest of the Month, Red Leaf Lettuce (or any other type of lettuce you can find). Even more fun, you can have the children put the salad ingredients on the sticks themselves. It is recommended to use popsicle sticks for young children.



Funding/Donation Opportunities

Help for Monarch Butterflies: Free Milkweeds

If your organization is a nonprofit, you qualify to apply for the [Free Milkweeds for Schools & Non-Profits](#) from MonarchWatch.org. Some determining factors for approval include adequate space for the milkweeds, support from administration, and other nectar sources for monarch butterflies. Approved Texas applicants will receive 58 milkweed plants, which can be shared with other schools nearby if there is not enough space in your facility.

Learning Opportunities

ChopChop Magazine

ChopChopFamily.org publishes a quarterly [magazine](#) containing fun ways to learn about food and cooking. The recipes included meet SNAP-ed nutrition requirements and use inexpensive ingredients. While geared toward families, the content is designed to be an exciting way for anyone to teach children about food related subjects.

Plants in the Classrooms

If you're looking for a way to improve your classroom atmosphere, try adding some plants. Research shows that plants in your classroom can reduce stress, improve creativity, and promote friendliness. This short article in [EducationWeek](#) also includes a link to the peer reviewed study published in the National Library of Medicine.

Farm Fresh Producer National Cabbage Day



Gather your friends and family to celebrate the humble cabbage on February 17. A versatile vegetable from the cruciferous family, cabbage is delicious prepared in a multitude of ways. It can be sauteed, braised, roasted, and fermented for a wonderful sauerkraut. Different varieties of cabbage include green, red, Savoy, Bok choy, and Napa. Did you know kale is also considered to be a member of the cabbage family?

Funding Opportunities

Go Organic

The [Rodale Institute](#) is offering microgrants worth up to \$2,000 for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous & People of Color) farmers who wish to increase, transition to, or implement organic farming practices. The funds should be used for purchasing tools and equipment or training and consulting needs. Applications are due **February 28, 2024**.

Learning Opportunities

Help with GAP Certification

The Organic Farmers Association hosts a recurring [Good Agricultural Practices \(GAP\) Audit Series](#) to help train farmers in the GAP certification process. The series is free, but participants are required to register for each of the 5 sessions separately.

Farm to School Opportunities

Farm to School Opportunity: \$22.3 Million Awarded to Purchase Local Food for Schools

In November 2023, the Texas Department of Agriculture (TDA) launched the Local Food for Schools (LFS) grant program that provides funding school nutrition programs use to purchase Texas-grown food from local farmers, ranchers, and small businesses! The purpose of the LFS program is to support local and regional food systems, establish or strengthen school connections to Texas agriculture, and get more Texas food on students' trays. **In total, \$22.3 million dollars have been allocated to schools across the state to purchase minimally processed or unprocessed local foods from Texas businesses.** Click [here](#) to view the list of LFS grant recipients and local products they are looking to purchase for this opportunity.

To learn more about how you can work with LFS schools, visit www.SquareMeals.org/LFS. Questions about the LFS grant opportunity? Please contact localfoodgrant@texasagriculture.gov.

Connect with LFS participants through the Farm Fresh Network

Participating LFS schools are in the process of searching for qualifying Texas producers and products they can spend LFS grant funds on as they increase the amount of Texas foods on school meal trays. TDA is encouraging schools to use the [Farm Fresh Network](#) (FFN) as a resource to find local producers. If you are currently registered in the TDA's [Farm Fresh Network](#), please review your entry and ensure your contact information is up to date. If you are not a member yet, please join [here](#). *For questions about your FFN membership or to update your FFN information, please contact farmfresh@texasagriculture.gov.*

Are you “Farm to School” ready?

Schools are looking for Texas producers to provide more local foods on student meal trays. Visit TDA's Farm to School [Tools for Producers](#) page for support and resources to help you prepare to work with child nutrition programs across Texas.

Additional Questions or Concerns? Please contact the Farm Fresh Initiative Team at farmfresh@texasagriculture.gov.

Farm Fresh Families

Getting to Know School Meals



Milk is an important part of what child nutrition programs offer with meals.

Welcome to the fifth edition of the School Food Digest!

Child nutrition operators need to provide at least two milk options at each meal. Currently, milk options should be fat-free or low-fat. There are sugar limits that must be met with flavored milks. Usually chocolate and white milk are offered on a regular basis, with strawberry milk being an option in some schools for holidays.

Milk and flavored milk are not the only approved options that can be served to meet federal nutrition guidelines. Though much less common, cultured milks (buttermilk, kefir, acidophilus), acidified milks (kefir and acidophilus), and Ultra High Temperature (shelf stable) milk are all options

that can be served, though they must be pasteurized. Lactose-free milk is also an approved option to be served to students.

What if a student can't drink cow's milk? Many students can't have cow's milk because of allergies, religious beliefs, ethical choices, and other reasons. In those cases, as long as the non-dairy milk replacement meets the same nutritional profile as cow's milk, child nutrition operators can offer the alternative and meet their menu guidelines.

Why is milk an important part of children's nutritional needs? Milk and milk products provide calcium, vitamins A, D, and B12, riboflavin, protein, and more minerals. The nutrients provided by dairy products help improve bone health, aiding with building bone mass and preventing the onset of osteoporosis in adulthood. Learn more from [MyPlate.gov](https://www.MyPlate.gov).

Find calcium-rich dairy recipes here: [Recipes](#)

Come back next month for our final installment of the School Food Digest to learn more about proteins in school meals.

Farm Fresh Back to Basics

Let's Get Planting!

Now is a great time to get your warm weather vegetables started indoors. Plant your tomato, pepper, squash, bean, and cucumber seeds inside now, so they're ready to be transplanted when the temperatures climb.

If you have the ability to plant fruit trees for your schools, now is the time to do it. The sooner you plant fruit trees, the better luck you will have getting them through the harsh Texas summers.

Find more tips from your local A&M AgriLife Extension Service.



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.

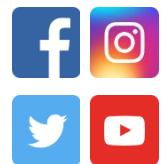
Interested in learning more about Texas products?

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



TEXAS DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
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