

Food Systems Action Projects

In the Food Systems Action Project, youth learn about our complex, modern day food system, starting at the local level. For example, they may create a neighborhood map showing sites where residents can buy or grow food. Or they could arrange for extra garden produce to be donated to a soup kitchen. Another possibility would be to conduct a garden produce taste testing party for children and their parents. The youth's conversations with the gardeners and observations in the neighborhood during the *i-m-science investigations* will help them define their Food Systems Action Project. Although the examples here come from community gardens, you should be able to adapt them for home or school garden or other youth programs.



Ideas for Food Systems Action Projects

Help establish a local produce stand

Find out how much money gardeners save by growing their own produce

Write a letter to school officials asking to include more local produce in school lunches

Create a neighborhood food map

Host a "local harvest" banquet

Conduct a survey of neighborhood residents about access to fresh produce

Conduct a vegetable taste testing party for children

Arrange for extra garden produce to be donated to a soup kitchen

Example Projects

Following are example Food Systems Action Projects. Our intent here is to give you a range of possibilities, which we hope will prove useful as you help the youth develop their own project.

Produce Stand

Youth learn during the *i-m-science investigations* that there are few places to buy vegetables in the neighborhood. During the Community Garden Inventory, several of the gardeners mention that they would be interested in selling their produce at a Saturday market. Similarly, several neighborhood residents visiting the garden mention that they would like to buy fresh produce. The youth meet with staff from local government agencies and non-profit organizations that work on food systems issues, and ask for advice on how they could start a produce stand. They work with the gardeners who are interested in selling produce and arrange for permission to have a stand in the neighborhood. The youth assist the gardeners with their stand by helping to harvest vegetables, make signs, and sell the produce. This activity is recommended for older youth and young adults.



Neighborhood Food Map

Youth learn during the *i-m-science investigations* that the gardeners obtain most of their produce from the garden. They are curious about how other residents in the neighborhood obtain food, especially fresh vegetables, and decide to create a map of all the places in the neighborhood where residents could obtain fresh food. To make their map, the youth walk through the neighborhood, taking notes and photographing places food is purchased (e.g., stores, green markets, or corner stands), grown (e.g., backyard, community, or school gardens), and distributed (e.g., soup kitchens). The youth visit several convenience and grocery stores along the route to ask about the produce and see if it is fresh. They then create a map/photo collage that highlights the places where food is available in the neighborhood. They laminate the map and give it to the gardeners, along with a presentation about their findings.

Food Systems Research

The youth are surprised when they learn how much produce the gardeners grow and wonder how much money they might be saving. The youth decide to conduct a study to determine the cost of the garden grown vegetables if purchased in local markets. They talk with the gardeners and create a list of the most commonly grown vegetables. They also ask the gardeners to estimate the amount produced of each vegetable. The youth then divide the list so that each person is responsible for finding out the cost at the local market of one or two vegetables. For each vegetable, the youth determine the amount of money saved by multiplying the amount the gardeners produce by the price in the store. They organize their results in a table and make a presentation to elected officials about the value of food produced in the garden to local residents.

Taste Tests

During the *i-m-science investigations*, the gardeners share their produce and the youth are surprised to learn how good fresh vegetables taste. The gardeners express concern that young people have poor diets and do not appreciate fresh vegetables. The youth decide to conduct a taste testing party for children from the neighborhood. They buy tomatoes from the store and help the gardeners harvest several tomato varieties from the garden. They then make a list of the different tomatoes and give each one a number. Next they cut up the tomatoes into small pieces and place them on plates with their numbers. (The children should not know which tomatoes are from the store and which are from the garden.) The children then taste each tomato, and vote on the tomato they like best. The youth share information on the importance of nutrition and eating healthy foods with the children. The gardeners then share tomatoes with the children to take home to their families.

Letter Writing

During their visits to the garden, the gardeners share tomatoes, squashes, and other fresh vegetables with the youth. These vegetables taste far better than those in the store or in school lunches. The youth feel that schools, nursing homes, and other institutions should be serving more fresh and locally grown produce. They write letters to their school administrators to emphasize the importance of fresh, locally grown food and request the use of more of these foods in their cafeterias.

Sharing the Harvest

The gardeners are always sharing their produce with garden visitors, including the youth. The gardeners mention that although they take home produce and share it with friends and family there is always more than they can use. The youth ask the gardeners if they would be interested in sharing their harvest with an organization that serves meals to the hungry. The gardeners are open to this possibility and the youth find a church soup kitchen that is interested in donations of fresh produce. They work with the gardeners and the church staff to arrange the donations.

Food Access Survey

The gardeners appear to get most of their produce from the garden. However, the youth are wondering if there are fruits and vegetables that the gardeners purchase instead of grow. Where do they go to buy them? Also, where do people in the neighborhood who do not garden go to get their produce? The youth decide to create a survey for the gardeners and neighborhood residents that asks these questions. They contact a social studies teacher to help design and implement the surveys. They compile their results and host a presentation to share their information with the gardeners and community residents.

Local Harvest Celebration

The gardeners grow a diversity of vegetables and the youth have enjoyed the opportunity to try some unfamiliar foods. They decide that it would be fun to have a celebration featuring food grown in the garden, as well as other locally grown fruits and vegetables. They learn from their local Cooperative Extension that many foods, such as apples, are grown just outside the city limits. The youth visit the city's Saturday Farm Market to learn about local produce and how it is grown. They share their findings with the gardeners and get permission to host a celebration for the gardeners and neighborhood residents. They use the Science Pages and the Internet to print out information on the different fruits, vegetables, and herbs they will feature. They then buy produce at the Farm Market and help the gardeners harvest their own produce. For the celebration, they set up tables for people to sample the different foods, and to read about how and where the foods are grown. Everyone enjoys the bounty of the region!

