

# impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

## Backyard Gardens volunteers meet senior produce needs at Caldwell farmers market

### AT A GLANCE

A booth stocked with donations of free, fresh garden produce grown by volunteers positively impacts the diets of area seniors and promotes social well-being.

### The Situation

In fall 2023, University of Idaho Extension was approached by Lindsey McConnell-Soong of Idaho's Well Connected Communities initiative to consult on increasing the amount of produce available to Senior Produce Program recipients at the Caldwell Farm to Fork Farmers' Market.

The Caldwell Senior Produce Program is modeled after the USDA Senior Farmers Market Nutrition program with a goal to improve and expand seniors' diets by adding fresh fruits and vegetables while supporting local growers. Seniors 60 years and older can take part in the program. Participants complete a six-question survey to receive a reusable weekly punch card and \$6 in produce vouchers each week. Age, income and residence are not verified. Vouchers may be used throughout the market season at any booth selling eligible items at the weeknight Caldwell market.

While the Caldwell Farm to Fork Market is growing into an established and popular weeknight public event, it does not yet have a steady roster of fresh produce vendors, and many weeks, the availability is limited. To help meet the gap in supply, we decided to explore home garden abundance in the community as a source of seasonal produce.



Seniors lined up early to obtain vouchers (left) and scan the Backyard Gardens booth (right). Photo by Ariel Agenbroad.

### Our Response

In spring 2024 Area UI Extension Educator Ariel Agenbroad and intern Elizabeth Renn met with McConnell-Soong, Brad Stokes, horticulture UI Extension educator in Canyon County, and Surine Greenway, family and consumer sciences UI Extension educator in Owyhee County to plan a pilot program.

Master gardener volunteers from Canyon County and Master food safety advisors from Owyhee County were recruited and received training on best practices for growing, harvesting and handling produce for quality and food safety, and received volunteer credit for donating homegrown fruits, vegetables and herbs.

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With guidance from Agenbroad, intern Renn researched comparative market pricing of fresh vegetables and market booth design principles. She suggested the name Backyard Gardens and created a logo, marketing materials and booth displays.

Destination Caldwell provided booth space, canopy, table and chairs at no cost. Produce from volunteers was collected at the University of Idaho Extension office in Caldwell, packed into coolers and transported to market. The Caldwell Health Coalition managed the Senior Voucher program and distributed vouchers.

### Program Outcomes

The Backyard Gardens booth operated for 11 weeks from July 16 to Aug. 24. Master gardener and master food safety advisor volunteers donated 1,351.41 pounds of fresh produce that was distributed to over 100 Canyon County seniors and other residents. Vouchers valued at \$1,155.00 were redeemed and another \$344.95 was collected in donations which was returned to the program.

An onsite dot-survey conducted Sept. 17 found that 98% of respondents looked forward to visiting the booth each week. At least 70% believed the booth increased the overall availability of fresh food at the market. Seventy-eight percent increased their visits to the Caldwell Farm to Fork Market to visit the booth.

In addition, 100% of respondents reported being able to obtain more fresh fruits and vegetables and eating more fresh fruits and vegetables because of the Backyard Gardens booth.

The benefits of visiting the Caldwell Farm to Fork Market and the Backyard Gardens booth extended beyond nutrition as well to social interaction and engagement among seniors. Destination Caldwell organized live music, food trucks, and a splash pad in conjunction

with the market that contributed to a community festival atmosphere. At least 71% of Backyard Gardens booth visitors reported making new friendships or connections with others, and 85% said they were more likely to get out of the house to attend the market.



In addition to coordinating garden donations and organizing set up, UI Extension intern Elizabeth Renn lent her welcoming presence to the weekly produce booth. Photo by Ariel Agenbroad.

### The Future

Utilizing homegrown abundance to solve an immediate need in the community proved successful, with the help of interns and volunteers. If demand continues to be unmet, we will consider continuing the Backyard Gardens program into 2025.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

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