

# TOUCH THE SOIL REPRINT



## “Food To Bank On” Program



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Article by Zachary D. Lyons

Northwest communities intervene directly into food banking, sustainable farming and saving farmland. It is a creative effort that is seeding the world for constructive change.



Photo - Sustainable Connections

(from left) Brent Harrison (mentor farmer), Billy Tate (Moondance Farms), Walter Haugen (F.A. Farms), David Peterson (Double Rainbow Farms), and Craig LaVallee (Nandaño Farms). As participants in the Food To Bank On program, these farmers are on the cutting edge of reshaping agriculture and food security.

25,000 individuals – 15 percent of the population – visited food banks in Whatcom County, Washington, a total of 210,000 times in 2005, according to Sustainable Connections, based in Bellingham, Wash. Meanwhile, the county lost 194 farms, accounting for 12 percent of all farms in the county, and it lost 11 percent of its farmland, between 1997 and 2002.

The Bellingham Community Food Co-op, while considering these disconnected though not unlinked problems proposed in 2002 a project that would kill two birds with one stone. It is about reconnecting the issues of hunger and farm loss, explained Shonie Schlotzhauer, food and farming program manager for Sustainable Connections, and the Food To Bank On project was born.

“The Co-op wanted something like this project to happen, so they put up funding for it through the Co-op Farm Fund,” Schlotzhauer said. “The Co-op then contracted with Sustainable Connections to run the project.”

Food To Bank On is a simple concept so simple that it is hard to imagine why it isn't being done everywhere. In a nutshell, the project trains new farmers, offers them mentorship by veteran farmers and provides them with a guaranteed market. That guaranteed market is a food bank. Money raised from the local community and natural-foods companies pays for the project. The result is to begin adding new farmers back into the region — 17 farms in the project in its first five years — while providing fresh, locally grown food of high nutritional value to the area's most nutritionally at risk through its food banks.

Farms must apply for acceptance into Food To Bank On,

said Schlotzhauer. The three-year training and mentoring program has eight slots for new farms, and those farms must meet certain criteria to include:

- A commitment to a future and livelihood in agriculture
- A commitment to sustainable farming practices
- A viable farm/business plan that targets a new market or one with sufficient room to grow
- A willingness to obtain a business license
- A minimum of one to three years of agricultural experience
- Less than three years of owner/operator experience
- Farm must be in Whatcom or Skagit Counties of Washington

“It has become a competitive application process,” Schlotzhauer said. “It wasn't originally. More and more farmers know about the project and seek assistance. A growing crop of young wannabe farmers wants to serve the community, live a farming lifestyle, produce good food, and run a viable business. The project is designed to support these people with training, networking, financial support through marketing, etc.”

“In 2004, a group of us decided to create a community garden,” said David Peterson of Double Rainbow Farms near Everson, Wash.

Then he got offered a chance to grow on a larger property. He learned about Food To Bank On and got accepted into it.

“Knowing I could sell a certain amount of produce to the food bank each week for 25 weeks meant I had an outlet to make back my initial investment,” Peterson said.

When Peterson entered the program in 2004, it paid him to deliver \$40 worth of produce per week to a local food bank. In

2007, enrolled farms can deliver food banks \$70 worth, based on prevailing wholesale prices.

Food To Bank On works with the farms to teach them how to develop farm and business plans, and the farms have contracts with the food banks they serve to provide them with certain crops in certain quantities and quality at anticipated times of the season. This provides the farms with business training and a guaranteed market for a portion of their crops while they are getting started. It provides the farmers with production expectations that help them acclimate to real-world farm business conditions.

"In 2004, I planted two acres, but a lot didn't work out. I was still learning a lot," Peterson said.

In 2005, he planted half an acre, an acre in 2006, and this year, his first year on his own since graduating the program at the end of 2006, he is growing on one-and-a-half acres.

"I now have an 18-member CSA, sell to a couple of restaurants, and I sell through a farm stand in Downtown Bellingham I have set up cooperatively with another farm," Peterson said.

Peterson says he used the project to get into farming. Food To Bank On offers new farms like Peterson's access to workshops on a myriad of topics, including business planning, successful succession planning, record keeping and weed and pest management. Technical assistance can amount to such seemingly simple tasks as how to have an invoice properly filled out and ready to get signed upon delivery and when to show up – or not show up, like during the restaurant's lunch rush – with a delivery.

The project offers new farms marketing assistance. Participating farms get membership in Sustainable Connections' Food and Farming Program, which gives them a listing in the Whatcom Farm Map & Guide, a listing in a local wholesale producer/buyer directory, access to trade meetings and more. And the farms are featured in media coverage, print publications and marketing tools that promote both the farms and the project.

"Trade meetings raise the level of understanding of the realities and needs on both sides of the market," Schlotzhauer said. "And the food bank provides the farms a real-world, market simulation scenario.

"The food bank is a customer, perhaps their first customer," Schlotzhauer continued. "They have to consider packaging. What is a case of lettuce? How many heads are in it? How are they bundled? Delivery timing, storage, handling, and packaging all must be considered."

"In this area, a lot of people live in the woods and have rocky soil that does not make for good gardens," said Pearl Zender of the Deming-Foothills Food Bank, nestled in the foothills of majestic Mount Baker.

The food bank serves 90 to 100 families.

"It gets a delivery once a week from June to September from Billy Tate of nearby Moondance Farm that can include lettuce, carrots, radishes, onions, beets, cabbage, cauliflower, broccoli, chard or spinach."

"Our families love it," Zender said.

Each family gets a couple of pounds of produce.

"It provides fresh vegetables that we would not otherwise have," Zender continued. "People really look forward to what we get from the farmer. It is good quality and fresh. We have

► Shonie Schlotzhauer, of Sustainable Connections, oversees the Food To Bank On program. Sustainable Connections is an affiliate of a much larger national sustainable business organization called BALLE (Business Alliance for Local Living Economies) [www.livingeconomies.org](http://www.livingeconomies.org)

Photo - Shonie Schlotzhauer



to dole it out and watch it carefully, or the whole box will go away."

"People donate money to a project to start farms that give food to food banks. It's a great idea," said Steve Powers of Big Sky Gardens in Van Zandt, Wash. who has been a mentor farmer since the project's inception in 2003.

"The project is small-scale, but it works. It gives new farms a boost," Powers said. "And mentoring is a benefit to me, too. The project is so attractive, farms get additional customers because of the local media coverage.

"Fifteen years ago, when I got started in farming, I worked on another farm and had help, but the resources available now are so much better," Powers said. "Mentoring helps teach new farms respect for existing farms – to keep quality up and to keep prices fair, to be cooperative."

"I love being connected to the farming community," said first-year participant Rebecca Morse of Jericho Farm in Birdview, Wash.

Jericho Farm is the first participating farm from Skagit County, to the south of Whatcom County. Morse sells her produce at a craft and flea market in Concrete, Wash.

"People had to go to Mount Vernon (35 miles away) to get local produce. Now I am developing regular local customers. Why would I drive to Mount Vernon to compete with bigger farms at its farmers market?"

Morse says she is developing as a farmer through the Food To Bank On project. Her food-bank contract is with Helping Hands in Sedro-Woolley, Wash., which distributes food to 12 food banks in Skagit County.

"They have a large, walk-in cooler, so I can deliver once a week, and they can hold it and distribute it throughout the week," she said.

Morse started those deliveries on June 12. She will be delivering green beans, head lettuce, tomatoes, etc. – crops that are familiar to rural families.

"The food bank is counting on me, so I am stressing about the late growing season, given the contract," Morse said. "It is helping me develop a new skill set of meeting expectations. I hope it will make me a more responsible farmer – a better record keeper."

Bellingham Community Co-op's Farm Fund initially funded Food To Bank On, and it remained the primary funder through 2006. Now funding has shifted to a broader, community-based system. Sustainable Connections has worked with the Co-op to leverage donations from its vendors, such as Nancy's Yogurt, Organic Valley, Emerald Valley Kitchens, and Woodstock



Photo - Sustainable Connections

Billy Tate (left) receives mentoring from Steve Powers. This formal cooperation of more experienced farmers helping newer farmers is fostered under the Food To Bank On Project.

Farms. Co-op customers may also make donations at the cash register. Local businesses, too, are contributing to the effort, such as Nimbus restaurant, Samuel's Furniture, and Terra Organica grocery. Food To Bank On has been embraced by the local community, which speaks well for the future of farming and the reduction of hunger.

"The learning curve goes up steeply when you are responsible for the bottom line," said Brian Campbell of Uprising Organics in Acme, Wash.

Campbell farms with his partner, Crystine Goldberg. They also graduated from the program in 2006. Now they are mentors.

"Mentoring and workshops have evolved over the years since we started. Now they include sessions on organic certification, soil fertility, insurance, taxes and record keeping, and seed production and saving," Campbell said.

"We took away from the project figuring out how to get low-income people good, nutritious food," Campbell said.

To that end, Uprising Organics is developing a 100 percent Food Stamp CSA. Subscribers will pay each week for their share box using Food Stamps. Clearly, Uprising Organics is taking the spirit of Food To Bank On to a whole new level.

"We really support the project," Campbell said. "It pieces together a lot of good things, from food banks to transitioning home gardeners and farm workers to new farmers. It gives people confidence." ■

#### Web Resources



Food To Bank On: [www.SustainableConnections.org](http://www.SustainableConnections.org)

Community Food Co-op: [www.communityfood.coop](http://www.communityfood.coop)

Business Alliance for Local Living Economies:  
[www.livingeconomies.org](http://www.livingeconomies.org)