

## Tennessee must get back to its veggie roots

Health issues demand healthier eating

8:21 PM, Jul. 1, 2011 |

*Written by*

Danielle Nierenberg and Dana Drugmand

Vegetables tend not to be the most enticing items on our dinner plates, but in a state with some of the highest diabetes and obesity rates in the U.S., the consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables is essential to fostering a healthy lifestyle.

For the 2010-11 school year, Tennessee received more than \$2 million to fund a Fresh Fruit and Vegetable program in 121 state elementary schools. Gov. Phil Bredesen praised the program, which provides free fruit and vegetables to students throughout the school day, saying “We can’t do enough to encourage healthy eating and living habits in our children.”

Consuming nutrient-packed veggies may be even more important now, considering that obesity has become a nationwide epidemic and diabetes is becoming more prevalent across the globe. In the United States, the Southeast has some of the highest rates of diabetes, and Tennessee is in the midst of this “diabetes belt.”

Tennessee also has one of the nation’s highest obesity rates, with the prevalence of obesity statewide at around 32 percent, according to 2009 CDC data.

The good news is that, according to the CDC, in 2009 Tennessee was the state with the highest percentage of adults (33 percent) who consumed vegetables three or more times per day. This 33 percent, however, is a decline from the 43 percent of Tennesseans who ate vegetables three or more times per day in 2000.

As vegetable consumption has declined in Tennessee, halfway around the world people are also lacking in their vegetable consumption. According to the World Vegetable Center, an international nonprofit research institute, “in sub-Saharan Africa the consumption of vegetables is only 43 percent of that recommended for good health.”

The center works directly with farmers to develop new varieties of vegetables that result in higher yields and better nutritional value.

As smallholder farmers are starting to grow indigenous vegetables in Africa, urban farmers back in the United States are working to increase city residents' access to fresh fruits and veggies. Nashville Urban Harvest, for example, operates a community farm and works to build a more sustainable food system for the city. The farm gives volunteers the opportunity to earn free produce in exchange for their work on the farm. Nashville Urban Harvest was also part of a partnership that launched "the Veggie Project" in 2007, which implemented nutrition education and farmers' markets at five Boys & Girls Clubs in Nashville.

Currently, less than 1 percent of cropland acreage in Tennessee is harvested for fruits and vegetables, according to Kaiser State Health Facts. But with staple crops such as wheat and corn especially vulnerable to drought, it is time to start thinking green. Vegetables tend to be more dependable than staple crops because they have shorter growing cycles and require less space. Indigenous vegetables, in particular, are often more hardy, drought-tolerant and resistant to pests and diseases.

Including fresh vegetables in your diet is essential to improving nutrition and overall wellness. Fortunately, there are a number of urban gardens and farmer's markets that provide Nashville area residents with fresh, local produce. Some examples include Greenwood Gardens in East Nashville, Woodbine Farmer's Market and East Nashville Farmer's Market. Check them out if you have a chance, and remember to eat your veggies!

**Danielle Nierenberg is project director of the Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing the Planet project;**[www.nourishingtheplanet.org](http://www.nourishingtheplanet.org). **Dana Drugmand is a research intern with Nourishing the Planet.**