

## Danielle Nierenberg and Christina Wright: Local gardens are way to go to fight hunger and obesity at same time

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Every year in the United States, Americans spend more than \$110 billion on fast food. Madison ranks ninth in the amount of money its residents spend on hamburgers, fried chicken, hot dogs, and other types of fast foods. Consuming these foods, which contain thousands of calories and few nutrients, has led to an obesity epidemic, as well as an increase in diseases like diabetes. Even though over 33 percent of Americans — more than 100 million people — are obese, there are still millions of Americans who are hungry and lack access to healthy foods.

We have an abundance of food in our country, yet there are 36.3 million Americans — including 13 million children — who are hungry and lack access to enough food. According to the Second Harvest Foodbank of Southern Wisconsin, an average of 22,700 people in its service area seek emergency food assistance in any given week. In Wisconsin, and across the country, we lack foods that nourish our bodies — fresh, locally grown produce; resources needed to fight hunger, obesity, and food deserts; and education about the health consequences of fast food. Although there is an abundance of inexpensive fast food, in the long run, cheap fast food isn't really cheap. But thankfully, there are people and organizations in Madison that are leading the way to healthy foods and steering clear of fast foods.

The Community Action Coalition of Southern Wisconsin, for example, maintains over 50 community gardens in Madison. The number of community gardens has doubled since 2002, and CAC continues to fulfill its mission by helping to reduce poverty and enabling communities to increase their economic and social capacities. For example, CAC educates people about gardening and growing food through conferences and workshops, supports youth garden projects and gardeners with physical disabilities, provides access to donated seeds and plants, and hosts an annual conference called Grow Together, among many other benefits that it provides to the local community.

Thanks to CAC, diverse groups of people come together, and the community gardens provide opportunities for cross-cultural exchange, community development, crime prevention, and leadership. According to CAC, in 2007 one family grew over 150 pounds of produce on a 400-square-foot garden plot. Not only did the garden provide them with fresh, healthy foods, but it also saved them the equivalent of \$389 that they would have spent to buy food.

In 1962, the University of Wisconsin created the Eagle Heights Community Garden, and it remains one of the oldest community gardens in the country. According to UW, the purpose of EHCG is to give people opportunities to enjoy nature, build community, learn about gardening, and feed their families. The garden brings together a diverse group of students, faculty, and families in the community. At last count, gardeners at EHCG spoke 60 languages.

In other parts of the world, including sub-Saharan Africa, similar solutions are being implemented to fight hunger and improve nutrition and food security. Over the course of two years, researchers from Worldwatch Institute's [www.NourishingthePlanet.org](http://www.NourishingthePlanet.org) Nourishing the Planet project traveled to 25 countries in sub-Saharan Africa to uncover a rich and diverse treasure trove of innovations from farmers' groups, private voluntary organizations, universities, and even agribusiness companies. These research findings were published in "State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet."

Here at home, we are fighting both hunger and obesity. When it comes to cheap fast food, no one can afford it. Consuming foods filled with fats, sugars, and chemicals has led to an obesity epidemic. And we haven't even solved the issue of hunger yet. Local projects, including the community gardens in Madison, are needed to fight hunger and improve our health and access to local food.

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