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The Value in Local Foods

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Eating locally grown foods is beneficial in many ways. It supports local businesses, keeping money in the community, and minimizes fossil fuels used in transportation and packaging. Eating locally can be a way to connect with food growers and consumers within your community. In Tucson, there are several organizations that provide services to market and distribute such commodities including: Native Seeds/SEARCH, Tucson Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), Desert Harvesters and Iskashitaa Refugee Harvesting Network. These established organizations illustrate the value of local food in the Tucson community.

Native Seeds/SEARCH

Producing food within a community begins with the right seeds. For thousands of years, agriculturists have selected and saved seeds, adapting them to particular environments, seasons, and climates. In the Sonoran Desert, Native Americans like the Tohono O'odham have contributed to this tradition. However environmental destruction, cultural change and land transfers have led to the loss of many of these traditional seeds. Native Seeds/SEARCH conserves, distributes, and documents over 350 varieties of agricultural crop seeds and their wild relatives, preserving their cultural heritage of the American Southwest and northwest Mexico. The inspiration for Native Seeds/SEARCH began in 1976 after Gary Paul Nabhan published an article in *Organic Gardening*. The article received a large positive response from readers and interested Native Americans. The Tohono O'odham wished to grow traditional crops, but the necessary seed stocks were missing. In fact, they were missing the seed supply for 30 to 40% of the crops they wanted and they were experiencing health problems such as diabetes without these disease-preventing crop foods in their diets. In order to preserve these essential crops and provide a valuable link with the cultural exchange among Native Americans, Native Seeds/SEARCH became a key regional seed bank in 1983 and a leader in the heirloom seed movement.

Tucson Community Supported Agriculture (CSA)

Tucson Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) was started in 2004 as a direct connection between regional producers and local consumers. Tucson CSA was founded by Philippe Waterinckx while he was a graduate student at the University of Arizona. Driven by the desire for a steady source of locally grown, organic produce, Philippe began contacting farmers in southern Arizona. He searched for a farm that practiced good land management without the use of pesticide practices as well as the capacity to deliver produce to its members every week. After speaking with Farmer Frank Martin, owner of Crooked Sky Farms in Phoenix, he knew he found the right farm. Frank is a skilled farmer, devoted to practicing sustainable land stewardship, fair wages and treatment of his workers, and to protect the preservation of heirloom varieties. In addition to this, he had already been supplying produce to two CSA's in Phoenix and Flagstaff. Frank requested that Philippe begin his CSA with a minimum of 15 members. The next week Philippe gathered 15 eager friends and Frank delivered his produce as promised. Over the next year membership grew to 50 members. In 2006, the publications of Michael Pollan's book *Omnivore's Dilemma* and Barbara Kingsolver's book *Animal, Vegetable,*

Miracle, motivated many people to seek out local food sources. Membership continued to increase significantly and today the Tucson CSA links over 500 members to area food producers.

Desert Harvesters

In another local food marketing effort, Brad Lancaster began Desert Harvesters in 2002 after being inspired by an instructor at an eco-village design workshop. He realized that there is a surplus of food available in Tucson growing on public right-of-ways (i.e. street curbs, medians, property lines) that the general public is not taking advantage of. He decided to put his plan into action by changing one neighborhood at a time, beginning first with his own. Desert Harvesters supports local food security and production by encouraging the planting of native, food-bearing shade trees in water-harvesting earthworks, and then educating the public on how to harvest and process the bounty. Brad encountered resistance at first because he was doing something new. He was able to dissolve this resistance by communicating the benefits of new ideas such as curb cuts to direct water runoff from the streets into peoples' yards to irrigate trees and show that his ideas really did work.

Iskashitaa Refugee Harvesting Network

Local food can be a means of integrating displaced refugees from other countries into a new culture. Iskashitaa Refugee Harvesting Network empowers refugees by creating opportunities to use their knowledge and skills in helping their families and the Tucson community. Barbara Eiswerth began the Refugees Harvest organization in 2003 when she became aware of the widespread food waste in and around Tucson and the global inequalities of hunger, food, and poverty. She wanted to create an awareness of the local food system by bridging communities through local exchange. She started her project by harvesting unused food from fruit-bearing trees in her neighborhood and sharing the food and knowledge with elders. Her effort has grown to a yearly harvest of 75,000 lbs. of fruit and vegetable crops from backyards and local farms. Each year the quantity of produce, the sites, the diversity of the crops harvested, and the increasing number of refugees requires more financial support and dedicated volunteers.

Empowering a Community

These organizations were started by motivated individuals who recognized opportunities in the form of the overlooked or underutilized components in their communities. Barbara Eiswerth explains that people must "broaden their mindset to value." People must think of what is important to themselves, their children, and the community they live in. Brad Lancaster adds that people with a desire for change "need to start in their own life for themselves and see if the idea works on a small level. The ultimate power of change is made in one's own life." It is within every individual's ability to change the way they live, which can extend to ones neighborhood or even further "It is important that we share values," suggests Gary Nabhan, "and build strong links to our community." Choosing to support local food producers can empower a community. With growing concerns of higher fuel costs and food shortages in the future, producing food locally might not be too bad of an idea.