



Seven
Generations
Ahead

Illinois Harvest of the Month 2017-18

Illinois Farm to School Network

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Overview

Beginning in 2016, Illinois Farm to School Network staff have been using the Illinois Harvest of the Month program as a catalyst to engage schools and child feeding sites to educate students on the importance of nutrition and local food, foster relationships between consumers and farmers, and grow the local food economy. Eligible sites include individual school sites, entire school districts, after school programs, early childcare sites, garden programs, residential programs, and juvenile justice centers. Harvest of the Month celebrates a different in-season, locally or regionally grown food item every month. Registered sites received a calendar of monthly featured produce items, but had flexibility to substitute what works best for their meal program. Several participants had active garden programs and utilized the program to feature produce items that students helped grow themselves; this fostered a deeper understanding and appreciation of where food comes from, the process of agriculture, and how tasty fresh produce can be.

The Data

After a successful pilot year running in conjunction with the 2016-17 school year, the official inaugural program year launched for the 2017-18 year. The program had 22 registered participants. This surmounted to 840 feeding or garden sites with a combined 467,555 students celebrating local, healthy food each month. Most, but not all, school sites were a part of the National School Lunch Program. One participant, Gourmet Gorilla, was a school lunch provider that worked with numerous sites and districts with varying site and enrollment numbers that are not included in the total.

A variety of organizations also partnered with the program to share the information with the sites they work with: Fit-2-Serve Community Gardens partner of Mattoon SD2, Gardeneers partner of CPS, O.A. Thorp LSC partner of CPS, Stonebridge Diabetes Support Group partnered with individual independent schools in Cook County, DeKalb County Community Gardens and Northwestern Medicine partner of DeKalb, Sycamore, and Genoa Schools, Alliance for a Healthier Generation with Cook County schools, and University of Illinois Extension Urbana with tri-county area schools.

From August 2017 to May 2018, a total of 638,131 pounds of local or regional food was procured by our program participants. This contributed to our local and regional food economies and provided students and their families with education on healthy foods. Participants were asked to complete quarterly surveys with data on procurement and program implementation. Not all surveys were returned, so the total number of pounds procured is likely higher than reported.

To qualify as local or regional and part of Harvest of the Month, food must be sourced from Illinois or one of its neighboring states (Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, or Wisconsin). In addition to produce purchased by 16 food service programs, four garden program sites also procured a variety of items in addition to occasional purchases by growing them on-site and combining hands-on garden education with Harvest of the Month lessons. This included potatoes, kale, bell peppers, hot peppers, rhubarb, tomatoes, cantaloupe, beets, cabbage, lettuce, and herbs. Many sites also participated in additional farm to school programming outside of Illinois Harvest of the Month, and therefore the total amount of local procurement statewide is much greater.

The program reached a diverse group of Illinois students. Participating sites spanned the state, reaching students in Bureau, Champaign, Cook, Henry, Kane, Lake, LaSalle, McLean, Sangamon, Will,

Winnebago and Woodford Counties. The highest density of students participating in Illinois Harvest of the Month resided in Cook County (86.2%). Amongst the feeding and garden sites, one participant was a residential program, one was a private school, one was an afterschool program, one was a meal provider to various districts and sites, and 18 were public school sites or districts. Excluding Gourmet Gorilla, over one-quarter of participants served a population of 0-24% eligible for free or reduced lunch (38.1%); slightly under one-quarter served a population 25-49% eligible (23.8%); and under one-quarter served a population of students 50-74% or 75-100% eligible (19.0% each).

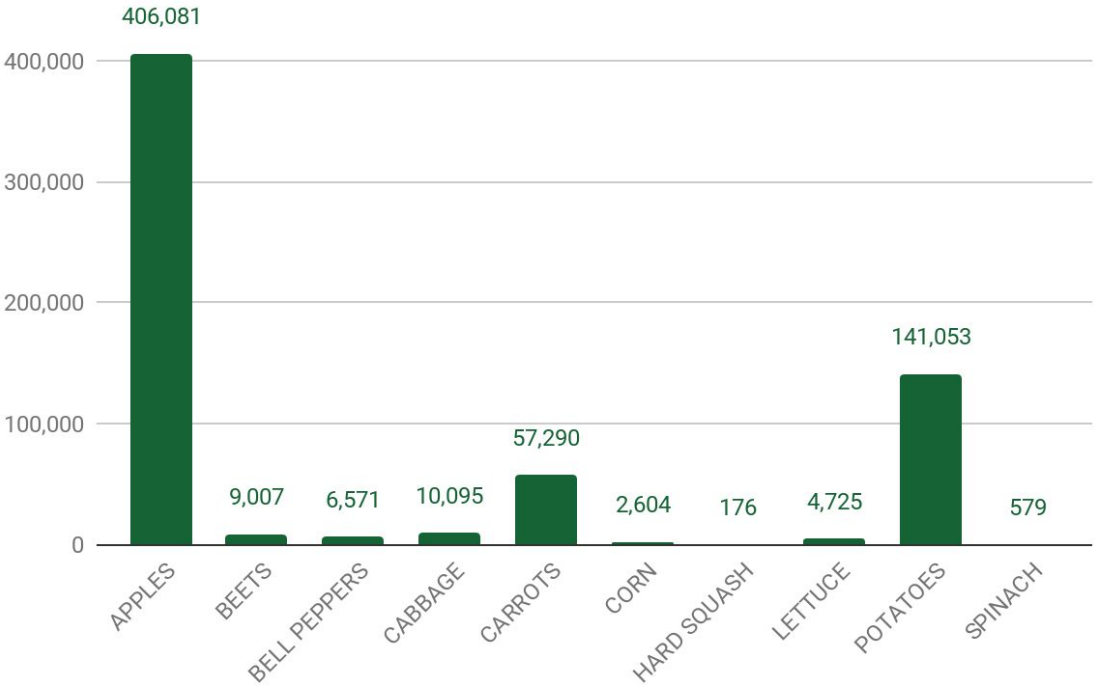


Figure 1. Pounds Purchased per Harvest Item

By a significant amount, apples represented the highest quantity of food item purchased from a local or regional source at 406,081 pounds. During the 2017-18 program year, apples were featured in two months, while all other items were featured once. Hard squash was purchased by two sites as substitutions during months where the featured item could not be procured. Sites reported costs, timing, lack of availability, issues with distributors, and a tough growing season as obstacles to procurement.

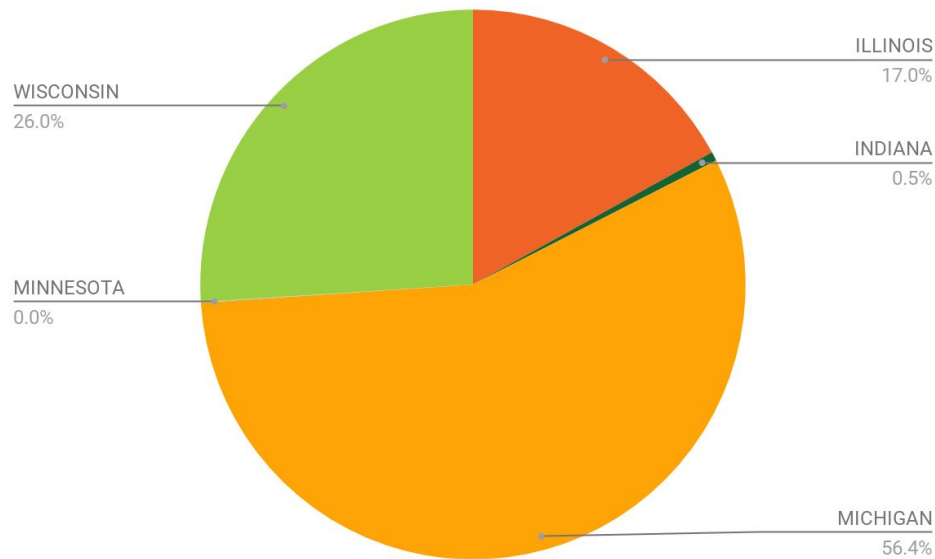


Figure 2. Approximate Percentages of Total Food Purchased by State

Approximately just over half of the food purchased via the Illinois Harvest of the Month program was sourced from Michigan (56.4%). Wisconsin sourced about one-quarter of the food (26.0%); less was sourced from Illinois (17.0%); smaller amounts of food were sourced from Indiana (0.53%) and Minnesota (0.04%). Notable Illinois food producers include Rendleman Orchard in Alto Pass and Norton's Produce in Campton Hills. Notable regional food producers include Cedar Valley in Grant, MI; E Miedema & Sons in Byron Center, MI; Jack Brown Produce in Sparta, MI; Malburg Farms in Hart, MI; Peterson Farms in Shelby, MI; River Ridge in Hartford, MI; Ruhlig Farms in Flat Rock, MI; and Alsum Farms in Arena, WI; and Coloma Farms in Coloma, WI.

Sites celebrated the program each month in a variety of ways, and resources and assistance were available. The [Illinois Harvest of the Month website](#) provided menuing suggestions, fun facts and nutrition facts, recipes for food service and for families, extension kits, and curriculum. Participating sites received calendar posters, a program booklet, access to a dedicated website, and a monthly email of tips of ideas and activities for the following's featured harvest item. Sites celebrated Harvest of the Month with tastings in cafeterias and classrooms, featuring items in menus, hands-on garden procurement and education, related curriculum and lesson plans, displaying posters and including the program logo on menus, sharing in newsletters, websites and social media, and other unique activities. Several sites utilized the community extension kit to collaborate with local grocery stores and engage the surrounding community in the program and conversation on local food procurement.

Many sites reported that the monthly tips email was the most useful tool, and the monthly calendar single featured item was the cause of the most difficulty though sites were encouraged to substitute with produce they could source. This feedback has been incorporated into changes for the next year including a seasonal calendar with multiple suggested foods.

Summary

The Illinois Harvest of the Month 2017-18 inaugural program year successfully engaged feeding and garden sites across the state to procure local food and implement nutrition education. Relationships with farmers were created and strengthened, broadline distributors were assisted with aggregation of local and regional foods and provided program basics, and the program is expected to expand in the 2018-19 school year in both participation and procurement. Over 840 sites and over 467,555 students participated and procured upwards of 638,131 pounds of locally- and regionally-grown food.

The creation of Illinois Harvest of the Month program was made possible by funds from the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm to School 2016 Grant. Thank you to our funders, our participants and to our partners! For more information on the Illinois Farm to School Network and its programs, visit our website (IllinoisFarmtoSchool.org) or contact us directly at farmtoschool@sevengenerationsahead.org.



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