



Farm to Cafeteria: Implementing a Fifth Season at Your School

Locally grown produce and eating healthy are big topics around the country. The USDA's Farm to School Program (USDA 2017) helps child nutrition program operators incorporate local foods in the National School Lunch Program and its associated programs, as well as the Summer Food Service Program and Child and Adult Care Food Program. Farm to School provides all kids access to nutritious, high-quality, local food so they are ready to learn and grow. Farm to School empowers children and their families to make informed food choices while strengthening the local economy and contributing to vibrant communities. Interest and enthusiasm for procuring local foods has increased at many schools, and the Child Nutrition Programs provide guidelines for purchasing locally grown products (Conell, et al. 2015).

The concept of a "Fifth Season" came from the understanding that the growing and harvest season may not coincide with school menu planning. The term "Fifth Season" is used to describe adding a "season" to the usual four seasons by processing and freezing the harvest in the summer when so many fruit, veggies, herbs and spices are most bountiful, and consuming them when school is in session. It is a wonderful way to provide local summer produce on the school menu whenever you wish. Local farmers can provide fresh, local, and seasonal food to be served on the school menu off-season by working with schools on a Fifth Season event.

Fifth Season Event. The best time for a Fifth Season event to occur is when crops are at their summer peak (Grace Communications 2017) which can vary year to year, but is usually from about 2 -3 weeks before school starts to about a week or two into the school year.

Involving farmers.

The procurement of local produce from local farmers results in an increase in market diversification and economic growth opportunities for farmers. Positive relationships between farmer, school districts, parents, and community members have been observed (Farm to School Network 2015). It is advised that you contact local farms early in the spring so they can plant for the purchase of produce at the peak of the season. The USDA Cooperative Extension Service in your community is a resource for schools and farmers and may be helpful in identifying potential farm and school partnerships. For information on local county Extension office locations refer to USDA NIFA website directory (2017). Call local farmers wishing to provide product to find out exactly what they will be delivering and when. You will want to communicate with your local farmers that you are purchasing the items, not expecting that the produce be donated. However if your farms wish to donate, that of course would be wonderful.

Certified Kitchen.

A certified kitchen (Korslund, et al. 2013), is needed to process the summer harvest, so ideally you will have access to a school cafeteria and/or culinary arts facility to process the fruits, vegetables, herbs and spices.

Volunteer Workforce.

Parent groups, service clubs and/or community volunteers will be needed for 1 to 3 days, depending on how much you will be processing. Figure 1 shows a group of community members volunteering for the Fifth Season event on Orcas Island.



Figure 1. Volunteers prepare local harvest for freezing to serve during the ‘fifth season’.

Fifth Season Tasks:

- Receive** – Inspect the produce that is delivered and group like items together, as illustrated in Figure 2;
- Process** – Processing with appropriate tools and equipment results in better quality and sizing of end product (Figure 3). Process includes cleaning, cutting, blanching, and flash freezing in preparation for the produce to be readied for long-term freezing;
- Package** – The blanched and cooled produce is bagged or transferred to proper containers to store safely in the freezer;
- Label** – The package label will include the product name, name of farm, weight, date, date prepared, and possibly other information, such as location, initials of volunteer;
- Store** – The processed produce will be stored in a commercial freezer for service at a later date – during the fifth season.

Supplies needed:

- Ziploc freezer grade plastic bags (lots of them!)
- Professional food processor machine
- Knives
- Vegetable peelers
- Marking pens
- Aprons
- Gloves



Food Safety and Oversight.

Cafeteria or school personnel will need to be present to oversee the event. All food handlers/volunteers will need to have food handling permit. The food handler test can be taken on line for a minimal cost. For information on food handler test requirements based on your state refer to Food Handlers classes online (2017). Practice tests (Hospitality Training Center 2017) and background information (Dept. of Health and Human Services 2017) can build confidence in the volunteer worker and ensure that safe food handling practices are followed.

Freezing.

Freezing is one of the simplest and least time consuming methods of food preservation. For best quality, it is important to follow directions carefully. Color, flavor, and nutritive value can be affected by freshness of the produce selected, method of preparation and packaging, and conditions of freezing (Pacific Northwest Extension Publication 2012, Singh 2009).

Ample freezer space needs to be available to store the processed and packaged items that have been labeled and dated. Flash freezing small batches of herbs and spices helps avoid freezer burn. Packaging in small batches makes it easier to take out just a portion needed for a recipe rather than defrosting the whole package. You will want to make sure you label and package the items according to your health department requirements. Unallowable food handling and preservation techniques include heating/canning -- the inherent character of the product is not retained because the heating process involved in canning changes the agricultural product into a product of a different kind or character (USDA FNS 2011). Vacuum packing is not typically permitted based on local health department standards. Make certain to verify your procedures with the local health department, school administration and any other powers that be that might be affected by this event.

Discussion.

At the Orcas Island Farm to Cafeteria “Fifth Season” program, wonderful fresh-frozen local food is served during the other seasons resulting in increased school lunch sales by 35% (Maddie Murray, personal correspondence, 2015). Kids are eating healthy lunches.

A twelve minute informative video provides an excellent overview of the Fifth Season concept, and provides a historical perspective. View at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1GRd-neKLoA>



Figure 3. A commercial grade food processor (e.g. Robot Coupe) is efficient in cutting and chopping large volume of produce.

Authors. Diane Smith, Food Access Specialist, WSU Extension Skagit County, Rita Ordonez, Fifth Season Volunteer, & Madie Murray, Director, Farm to Cafeteria, Orcas Island, Washington 5/2015; draft revision 11/2017

References

- Conell, C., M. Gosselin, M., and D. Kane. 2015. *Procuring local foods for Child Nutrition Programs*. USDA FNS-465. Available from https://fns-prod.azureedge.net/sites/default/files/f2s/F2S_Procuring_Local_Foods_Child_Nutrition_Prog_Guide.pdf
- Food Handlers Classes. 2017. *Online Food Handlers Certificate Service*. Available from <https://www.foodhandlerclasses.com/index.asp>.
- Grace Communications. 2017. *Seasonal Food Guide*. Available from <https://www.seasonalfoodguide.org/>
- Hospitality Training Center. 2017. *ServSafe Food Handler Practice Assessment – Questions and Answers*. Available from <https://www.hospitalitytrainingcenter.com/servsafe/handler/test/>.
- Korslund, K, G. Schweser, and R. Grewell. 2013. *Commercial Kitchen Guide*. University of Minnesota. Available from http://www.misadocuments.info/Commercial_Kitchen_Guide.pdf
- Murray, M. n.d. 2015. Personal correspondence.
- National Farm to School Network. 2017. *The Benefits of Farm to School*. Available from <http://www.farmentoschool.org/Resources/BenefitsFactSheet.pdf>
- Pacific Northwest Extension Publication. 2012. *Freezing Fruits and Vegetables*. PNW-214. Available from http://extension.oregonstate.edu/fch/sites/default/files/documents/pnw_214_freezingfruitsandvegetables.pdf
- Singh, R. Paul. 2009. *Food freezing*. Food Engineering-Volume III: 53. Available from <https://books.google.com/books?id=3e2yCwAAQBAJ&pg=PA53&dq=singh+freezing+Food+Engineering->
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. 2017. *Tips for Fresh Produce Safety* Available from <https://www.foodsafety.gov/keep/types/fruits/tipsfreshprodsafety.html>
- United States Department of Agriculture. National Institute of Food and Agriculture. 2017. *Land Grant University Website Directory*. Available from <https://nifa.usda.gov/land-grant-colleges-and-universities-partner-website-directory>

USDA Food and Nutrition Services. 2011. Final Rule: Geographic Preference Option for the Procurement of Unprocessed Agricultural Products in Child Nutrition Programs. Available from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/school-meals/fr-042211>

USDA Food and Nutrition Services. 2017. *Community Food Systems Farm to School Program*. Available from <https://www.fns.usda.gov/farmtoschool/farm-school> Volume+III&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjL65bWio3XAhVHrFQKHVSwCm4Q6AEIKDAA#v=onepage&q=singh%20freezing%20Food%20Engineering-Volume%20III&f=false