

Community gardens increase access to fresh, healthy produce

Dear readers: A shout-out to my long-time friend, colleague and personal physician, Dr. Janice Daugherty. She is retiring from the Brody School of Medicine where she has been advocating for patients and for students since the early 1980s. She didn't receive more than a "thank you" when she spent time reviewing one of these columns when I wasn't quite sure the content was medically accurate. Years ago, we wrote a paper together called, "Has the health and fitness movement bypassed rural children?" to encourage family physicians to counsel their families about healthy diet and physical activity. And most recently along with a medical student we wrote about how to help older patients lose weight safely. Thanks Dr. D. Happy retirement.



KATHY KOLASA

much of an impact diet-related diseases have on vulnerable populations. He learned individual-

als don't always have control over what they eat because of their financial status, geographic location or other barriers. That nonprofit had a food pantry which had produce supplied by a nearby garden which was tended to by some of the volunteer physicians. He has some ideas for you.

Your doctor may have recommended that you eat better and exercise more. As diet-related diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes become more prevalent, it's not bad advice.

It sounds easy enough to say but there are challenges. Cost and availability of healthy foods can be a concern for those living in food deserts or other areas with high levels of food insecurity. The USDA defines food deserts as areas where a proportion of the population has low access to supermarkets which carry fresh produce and healthy groceries for affordable prices.

In Pitt County, approximately 14,500 people or 9



of 100 people live in a food desert. But more broadly, food insecurity, which is when an individual has difficulty obtaining enough food for their household whether they live in a food desert or not, affects 35,400 or about 1 in 5 Pitt County residents.

Though there are resources available for the food insecure, such as community gardens, church food pantries or the medical food pantry ECU Health has for its patients, many of them only operate during normal business hours. Individuals living paycheck to paycheck, who cannot afford to take time off work, are usually unable to benefit from these resources.

One way to increase access to fresh produce is by the establishment of community gardens. There is growing evidence that

increasing green space in urban spaces foster environmental sustainability and strengthen neighborhoods, community capacity, and capital. Currently, there are several community gardens in Pitt County and many are unknown to most Pitt County residents. Visit the website "Making Pitt Fit Community Garden" <https://www.pittcountync.gov/717/Making-Pitt-Fit-Community-Garden> to find resources on starting community gardens. Your group might choose to get involved with existing ones.

Another challenge to maintaining a healthy diet is housing instability. Becoming homeless can create new health problems or exacerbate existing ones. Not having stable housing creates challenges to

maintaining a healthy diet. The ability to cook one's own food is decreased with unreliable access to kitchens or microwaves.

Another challenge is the meals that are served to homeless individuals are typically low cost, filling meals that often are high in salt, sugars and carbohydrates. I am intrigued by a community garden organization in California, Growing Hope Gardens (<https://www.growinghopegardens.org>) as a model for groups interested in helping those with low income or experiencing homelessness. They have a paid individual to maintain the garden, provide workshops for residents

to acquire job skills and learn how to utilize/maintain urban gardens to increase food security.

This type of community garden provides myriad benefits including improving mental and physical health, providing opportunities to eat healthier, revitalizing communities and improving social well-being.

Community gardens are more flexible, as they are always open. Of course, the other challenges remain like what to do with the produce including how to prepare and cook it. One way to further increase the ease of incorporating fresh produce from community gardens into our diet is to provide recipes that can be used with different types of equipment especially for those without stoves or only access to microwaves or no way to heat their food.

The Food Bank of Central and Eastern Carolina is a major player in addressing food insecurity in our area. Officials may have advice for your group.

Professor emeritus Kathy Kolasa, a registered dietitian nutritionist and Ph.D., is an affiliate professor in the Brody School of Medicine at ECU. Contact her at kolasaka@ecu.edu.

ASK THE DOCTORS

Scent therapy may help to preserve memory

My husband and I just hit 65 and are interested in information about preserving memory. I just read about a study that says using your sense of smell more often can be helpful. Do you have any information about that study? The details have been pretty vague.



EVE GLAZIER



ELIZABETH KO

volume and a decrease in the rate of cognitive decline in older adults. At the same time, a decline in the sense of smell has been found to be an early symptom of neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson's and Alzheimer's.

As for why scent and memory are linked, anatomy appears to play a role.

The area of the brain that receives scent signals from the nose is known as the olfactory bulb. It decodes those signals, then shares them with nearby structures in the brain, which are collectively known as the limbic system. These have been found to play a role in emotion, mood and, yes, memory.

The UC Irvine researchers have called the results of this new study statistically significant. However, they have also been careful to point out that larger and longer studies are needed to confirm the findings. The hope is that, with

the encouraging results in this avenue of inquiry, scent therapies may someday become a viable means of enriching memory.

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