



Growing Farm to School Processing During Summer Break

By Alisha Bicknell

Every Wednesday morning for the past six weeks, I've pulled into the parking lot at ACEnet's [Food & Farm Enterprise Center](#) in Nelsonville, floral head scarf on, ready to wash, slice, and bag fresh local produce. Sometimes, it seems this is a forgotten step in the farm to "insert location here" world; fresh local produce means nothing if the group on the receiving end doesn't have the time or capacity to process it. Thankfully, our team at Rural Action has been set up to succeed in offering processed local produce to institutions serving children!

The shared-use kitchens at [ACEnet](#) allow our team, including staff and AmeriCorps service members, to utilize the large clean prep areas, produce wash sink, and three-compartment dish sink to take the fresh local produce and create portion-sized bags and frozen bulk servings so that those local buyers can serve the food straight to children in Appalachia, Ohio. Last winter, I took the ServSafe Manager training from Adam Kody, the Director of Operations at ACEnet, in preparation for leading this team of produce handlers.

For ten weeks this summer and last summer, our main processed food destination has been the [Corporation for Ohio Appalachian Development \(COAD\)](#) summer food program. COAD delivers over 500 free food boxes(!) each week for ten weeks during the summer to children in Appalachian Ohio counties. Their program gets this fresh, local, and nutritious processed fruit and vegetables into children's hands while school isn't in session. A summer break for some is not a break for all when food insecurity is affecting the area, and [Southeast Ohio continues to have food insecurity rates higher than the rest of the state](#).

Most of the food we process comes from the [Chesterhill Produce Auction](#), a social enterprise of Rural Action and a food hub in Morgan County, OH, that served almost 300 sellers last year. For the COAD

program, we have also directly supported multiple Southeast Ohio growers, including [Wagner's Fruit Farm](#) and [Stacy Family Farm](#), to increase our access to bulk fresh fruit that we are able to provide.

The other outlet for our processed Farm to School food is the Athens City School District. Partnering with this school allows us to reach over 1,000 children with each item! This year, so far, we have frozen berries and blanched and frozen green beans that will be served this coming school year to all grade levels from Pre-K to 12th. This fall, we will continue this work with carrots, sweet potatoes, corn, and other items as they come into season. Many of these will be served during school lunch as a monthly feature and taste test called "Harvest of the Month," but others, such as the green beans, will be swapped for green beans that the school would have bought from a national producer.

The Farm to School team works hard to process this food, learning new knife skills, safe produce handling, and how to sort and grade produce. Our team thus far has included our Summer Food Cohort members Ellie Beringer, Phoebe Giordano, Myles Lamson, and Sam McAvoy, and their cohort leader Shan Klemens, the Farm to Institution COMCorps member Thomas Faber, our Food Access AmeriCorps member Sam Watson, and staff including Izzy Stitchick, the [Appalachia Accessible Food Network](#) Coordinator, Shane Benton, Rural Action's Food Access Manager and myself, the Farm to Institution Manager.

Now, why all this work to serve local foods? This question has many answers, the first being that [food that is allowed to fully ripen before being picked tastes better and is more nutritious](#)! I hope this food helps children learn to love locally grown fruit and vegetables. Serving fresh, nutritious local foods through school and community programs also helps contribute to creating an equitable food system, allowing those who may not have the opportunity to eat local foods at home to have a place where they receive them. There are also environmental reasons for shortening the supply chain; driving produce from Chesterhill to Nelsonville is much more sustainable than food shipped from somewhere like California. Lastly, buying and serving local food helps support our Southeast Ohio economy and the farmers that grow and sell locally, supporting the growth of the local food economy.

Maybe, one day, local food will be the go-to for institutions and organizations throughout the United States, with a robust network of processing facilities ready to take locally grown food and get it into the hands of local institutions. That's definitely something I'll be working on - but, for now, I'll keep that floral head scarf close by.