



COURTESY OF WILLAMETTE FARM & FOOD COALITION

Farm to School intern Chelsea Young helps Applegate Elementary students gather eggs on a field trip to Laughing Stock Farm in Lorane.

Willamette Farm & Food Coalition

Supporting local food for 25 years

BY VANESSA SALVA

FOOD USED TO BE SIMPLE—people ate what they grew and traded for what couldn't be produced on the home turf. Food was local and organic, grass-fed, and free-range because there was no system in place for it to be otherwise. Today, foods are commodities pushed through a trans-global transport system, with an oft-quoted statistic being that each item travels an average of 1,500 miles to reach our plates.

The staff at Willamette Farm & Food Coalition would like to reduce that number. WFFC began 25 years ago as Edible City Resource Center, with a focus on urban farming. Members at that time started a newsletter about worm composting, *The Worm Digest*, which spun off into its own organization and national and international publication. After restructuring in the late '90s, WFFC began to focus on connecting farmers with consumers and building strong local markets.

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Purchase the book, *A Guide to Local, Seasonal Sustenance in the Pacific Northwest*, written by Eugenean Elin England, and 10 percent of the proceeds will go to Willamette Farm & Food Coalition. England's book contains recipes and lists of produce by season, making it easy to prepare delicious and simple food from local ingredients. Available at lulu.com and from the WFFC office.



“Often the cafeteria people will say, ‘Oh, they’ll never eat those vegetables,’” Fessenden says, “and they do!”

Lynne Fessenden, WFFC executive director since 2006, oversees a number of projects supporting local agriculture—and the local economy by extension—through outreach, education, and farmland preservation work; perhaps the most prominent is *Locally Grown*, a guide to local farms and food producers that is available at numerous local establishments and online.

Fessenden spends much of her time making it as easy as possible for restaurants and institutions to source ingredients locally. “I don’t like to lecture,” Fessenden says. “I just encourage people to figure out the one thing they *can* source locally. Maybe it’s just at a given time. Maybe you don’t shop at the farmers market all year, but you go in September when everybody has tomatoes and they’re cheap. Figure out what you can do and do it.”

WFFC staffer Megan Kendall oversees the coalition’s farm-to-school program at three schools in the Eugene 4J district, two schools in the Bethel district, and two schools in the Springfield district. The focus initially was getting better food in schools, but now also involves farm field trips, school gardens, nutrition lessons, and tasting tables of fresh produce—and the kids eat eagerly. “Often the cafeteria people will say, ‘Oh, they’ll never eat those vegetables,’” Fessenden says, “and they do!” Every school district has a different willingness and ability to source local ingredients. For instance, most of the food served in the Eugene 4J school district comes already prepared. “They don’t have someone to peel a carrot or wash a potato,” Fessenden remarks. Despite those challenges, Eugene 4J committed to a harvest-of-the-month program, where they source some Oregon product and serve it in schools every week for a month.

WFFC is also working with Ten Rivers Food Web in Corvallis on the Bean and Grain Project, to support farmers in transitioning from grass seed to food crops. Farmers have been growing grass seed in the Willamette Valley for only about three decades, but the knowledge of how to grow other



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Top to bottom: Students at Lorane Elementary School enjoy fresh peas at a Farm to School tasting table. Farmer John Karlik of Sweetwater Farm in Creswell welcomes students from Applegate and Lorane Elementary Schools. Lorane elementary student samples a fresh turnip.

crops hasn't been carried over. "We live where we could literally feed ourselves if all those grass seed acres were in food," says Fessenden, "with food to spare."

WFFC outreach work includes collaborating with Helios Network on a series of potluck dinners called Eat Here Now. The groups host farmer appreciation and themed dinners focused on local food. Fessenden is also creating an informational packet for city and county government event planners that will help them locate caterers that source locally and distributors that stock local items.

Fessenden foresees a future in which shipping food around the world will become prohibitively expensive, and people will rely on local producers to feed themselves. "Eventually we're going to be more concerned about 'Do we have food, and do we have enough?'" she says, "versus how much we're paying for it," and every investment in local food helps ensure our region's long-term food security. "Do we have enough people farming to feed our population? Are they making enough of a living to keep farming? Right now, it doesn't feel like there is a clear system, but we feel like little steps and building people's awareness is going to improve the situation."

"And you know," says Fessenden, "once you start buying food from the farmers market or from a CSA, most people are thrilled and they don't want to go back." ■

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