

FEATURED

## UGarden strives to be oasis in food desert

Jeanette Kazmierczak Sep 11, 2013







Imagine not having a car, living in a low-income family in an urban area where the nearest supermarket with healthy food was more than half a mile away. Where would you buy groceries? The corner convenience store? The nearest fast-food restaurant? Are those venues likely to have fresh fruits and vegetables?

According to the United States Department of Agriculture, people in this situation live in a food desert — food deserts can also occur in poor rural areas, where the nearest supermarket is over 10 miles away. And, according to 2010 census data and supermarket information, a large portion of Athens-Clarke County — including the University of Georgia — is in a food desert.

“[Athens] has a shockingly high poverty rate — something like 36 percent of the population in Athens is considered to be below the poverty line,” said David Berle, an associate professor of horticulture at UGA. “And that has always bothered me, in the sense that we have a flagship university and yet we have what is considered to be one of the poorest counties, not just in Georgia, but in the country.”



One out of every five people in Athens-Clarke County are food insecure, and 11 out of the 29 census tracts can be classified as a food desert, according to a study done by UGA researchers and published in 2012.

Berle and the horticultural department as a whole, he said, have altered their teaching methods to address some of the issues surrounding poverty and food deserts, including service-learning aspects and a local food systems certificate.

One major push is the UGArden, which started as a group of students interested in gardening and has become a location where Berle can teach classes about how to grow food sustainably. The main garden is on South Milledge Avenue near the State Botanical Gardens, but there are two satellite gardens at Clarke Middle School and the Athens Community Council on Aging, Berle said.

Produce grown by the UGArden and its satellites are given to Campus Kitchen — a group dedicated to lessening food waste — and a mobile produce truck.

“[The students who run the truck] sell produce to people that have food stamps at half price so that they still pay for it, but they’re paying using their food stamps and they’re paying a lot less than they would pay at the grocery store,” Berle said.

The role of food stamps in consumers’ food purchasing choices is one research interest of Jung Sun Lee, an associate professor of food and nutrition.

“Different venues providing fresh fruit produce — fruit and vegetable — not many food stamp participants are willing to try [them] because they may not be able to use their [Electronic Benefits Transfer] card, that’s the benefit card that is getting used, so there have been different kinds of approaches to improve this food stamp program to include some different types of venues where people are able to access healthful types of foods,” Lee said.

She said people on food stamps present interesting social demographics and economic characteristics — one study conducted of the Athens area showed the income required to purchase a healthy diet was much higher than USDA estimates.

“We all know that a lot of different health statistics of the Georgian population are always worse than what we saw in other states, so the Georgian population generally has a higher prevalence of chronic disease,” Lee said.

The focus on community gardens is not specific to Athens, said Susan Varlamoff, director of the Office of Environmental Services. She has been helping and advising community gardens in Atlanta of which 50 percent has been identified as a USDA food desert.

“We’ve got leadership in the mayor, and he has decided, in his sustainability plan — which is called Power to Change — he put in there that he wants to bring fresh food to 75 percent of his people within one mile of their house by 2020,” Varlamoff said.

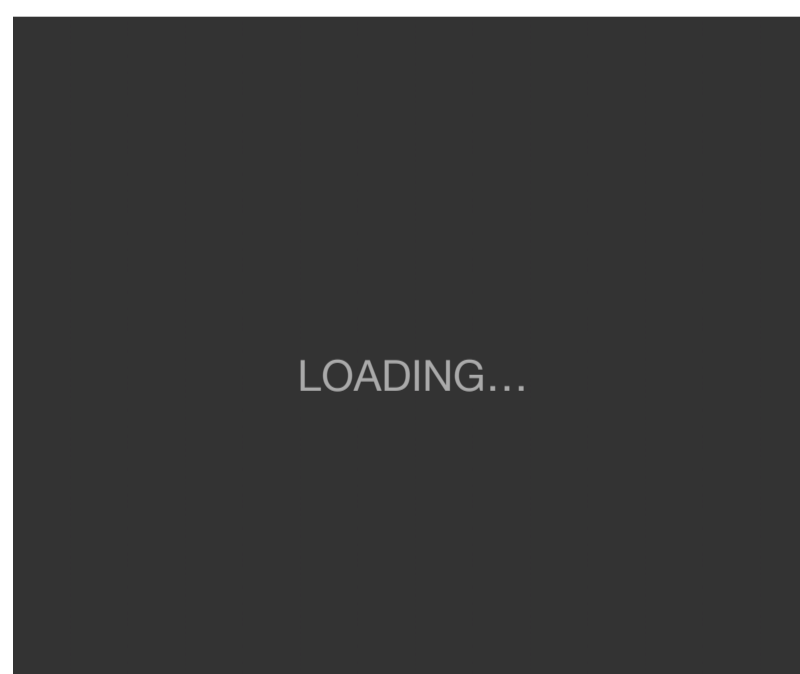
She said she volunteered the help of the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences when the mayor unveiled the project at a press release, when he decided to build a garden in an empty lot across the street from Atlanta’s city hall, his office contacted Varlamoff for advise.

Other projects include a farmer on the Atlanta BeltLine, a farmers’ hub in Chattahoochee Hills in Fulton County, and a community garden across the street from the Atlanta’s largest men’s homeless shelter, Varlamoff said.

The Fulton Fresh Mobile Farmers Market, an old EMS van, provides services like the UGarden’s mobile produce market, taking fresh fruit and vegetables into food deserts.

“These community gardens are restoring neighborhoods — they’re cutting crime. They’re cutting crime because you have more eyes and ears on the street. So the drug dealers and the pimps, they’ve got to move on. That’s a huge, huge, huge thing,” Varlamoff said. “We have evidence of this in areas like New York City, where I’m from. They’ve got a 30-year history of doing this kind of thing and they’ve got some data to show that once these community gardens are thriving in neighborhood the value of the land goes up too.”

Berle said this holds true in some sense for the Athens community serviced by the UGarden and other community gardens sponsored by the Athens Land Trust. Getting people to come to the gardens in the first place can be a challenge, but has its rewards.



“Gardening’s not a national pastime, and it’s not a given that if you build a garden people will come to it,” Berle said. “But where people have come to it, those people have a positive experience.”







She Blinded Me with Science: Is it safe to culture your own kombucha tea?





+6

Campus resources continue awareness during suicide prevention month



UGA students to engage in naval battle at Ramsey





+5

Greek councils seek increased cooperation, maintain individuality



Apple predicted to release new iPhone in coming days



Brain-scanning, movie trailers help UGA professors understand cognition





Dolphins killed by measles-related virus, UGA researchers say





📷 +3

Old meets new: Jackson Street Building recognized as environmental leader



 +2

What your grocery cart says about you

Small, local retail stores could be solutions for local food deserts



UGA sustainability efforts improving after unbalanced waste, recycling



 +2

Growing number of students suffering from food insecurity as college costs rise