



Cultivating the

Food Desert

By Allie Nicodemo

Candy bars for breakfast and potato chips for lunch? It might sound delicious, but that kind of diet won't fuel a healthy body. But for some urban families, these foods may be easier to find than fresh vegetables and whole grains.

Certain communities are considered "food deserts." This means that most residents do not have access to a grocery store or supermarket.

Living in a food desert makes it tough to prepare healthy meals. The local corner store might stock some fresh produce, but it often costs more than it would at the supermarket. And instead of lean meats like chicken breast, convenience stores sell processed meats like beef jerky. For people who do not own cars, shopping in neighborhoods with a better food selection may not be possible.

"The supermarkets around these neighborhoods have either moved or gone out of business. If you don't have an easy way to get to a supermarket, then you don't have equal access to the quality of food that somebody living in another neighborhood might," says Tommy Bleasdale.

Bleasdale is a Ph.D. student at Arizona State University (ASU) studying environmental social science. He wanted to understand the challenges that some inner-city residents face in finding healthy food. He worked with Carolyn Crouch, a master's student in sustainability. The pair studied one community in the heart of Phoenix.

Crouch looked at each of the community's 14 food outlets to learn about the nutrition environment in

the area. There is no grocery store within one mile of the neighborhood. So these food outlets included convenience stores, ethnic food marts and dollar stores.

She found that the community, like many others across the U.S., is a food desert. A week after Crouch published her findings, the U.S. Department of Agriculture released its own survey confirming that the area is a food desert.

Homegrown health

People in urban areas have found that community gardens offer one solution to the food desert problem. A community garden is a plot of land used by many people to grow plants. They can be particularly useful for people who don't have their own backyards.

"That's something that people can do—they can afford the produce because they're growing it themselves. It's kind of a ground-up strategy," Bleasdale says.





Photo by Kendal Drake, Phoenix Revitalization Corp.

The Phoenix Revitalization Corporation (PRC) works with people in a part of Phoenix known as Central City South. The PRC runs a community gardening program and wants to expand into more neighborhoods. To help them understand the needs of the community, Bleasdale surveyed 149 residents on the benefits and burdens of gardening.

Most of the respondents said they were interested in community gardening. But 82 percent didn't know that gardens already exist in Central City South.

The respondents saw many benefits in community gardening. The main one was that it would provide them with more nutritious food. Other benefits included exercise, helping the environment and relaxation.

But people also mentioned obstacles to gardening, such as lack

of space and excessive heat. Lack of time was also a concern.

"A lot of the residents have multiple jobs and the only way they can pull through is working 60 or 70 hours a week, so time was a huge issue," Bleasdale says.

Now the PRC has a better understanding of the community's thoughts on gardening. They can tailor the program and make it possible for more residents to participate. Bleasdale suggests using colorful signs to advertise gardens and a community bulletin board to increase communication. Providing education on gardening methods would allow residents with no experience to participate.

Recently, the PRC received funding to build a new half-acre garden. Bleasdale says that's one reason why it's important to do this kind of research.

"It gives the organization leverage in getting grants. Also, by showing what this particular community wanted, we can start to discuss other food desert communities around it."

Visit the USDA Food Desert Locator to find out where food deserts exist in the United States: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-desert-locator.aspx>

