



## FARM TO CAFETERIA IMPLEMENTING A FIFTH SEASON AT YOUR SCHOOL

**Diane Smith**, Food Access Specialist, WSU Extension Skagit County, Washington State University; **Rita Ordóñez**, Fifth Season Volunteer; **Madie Murray**, Chair of Farm to Cafeteria (2008–2015), Orcas Island, Washington

## Introduction

There is a growing interest in local foods in the United States, attributed to consumer interest in environmental and community concerns—supporting local farmers and the local economy with increasing interest and access to healthful foods. The USDA’s Farm to School Program helps child nutrition program operators incorporate local foods into the National School Lunch Program and its associated programs, as well as the Summer Food Service Program and Child and Adult Care Food Program (USDA 2017). Farm to School provides all kids access to nutritious, high-quality, local food, so they are ready to learn and grow. Farm to School empowers children and their families to make informed food choices while strengthening the local economy and contributing to vibrant communities (Conell et al. 2015). Interest and enthusiasm for procuring local foods has increased at many schools, and the Child Nutrition Programs provide guidelines for purchasing locally grown products.

The concept of a “Fifth Season” came from the understanding that the growing and harvest season may not coincide with school menu planning. The term “Fifth Season” is used to describe adding a “season” to the usual four seasons by processing and freezing the harvest in the summer when so many fruit, veggies, herbs, and spices are most bountiful. It is a wonderful way to provide local summer produce on the school menu during the school year. Local farmers can provide fresh, local, and seasonal food to be served on the school menu, off-season, by working with schools on a Fifth Season event.

## Certified Kitchen

A certified kitchen is needed to process the summer harvest, so, ideally, you will have access to a school cafeteria or culinary arts facility to process the fruits, vegetables, herbs, and spices (Korslund et al. 2013).

## *Fifth Season Event*

The best time for a Fifth Season event is when crops are at their summer peak, which can vary year-to-year but is usually from about two to three weeks before school starts to about a week or two into the school year (Grace Communications 2017).

## *Involving Farmers*

The procurement of local produce from local farmers results in an increase in market diversification and economic growth opportunities for farmers and builds positive relationships between farmers, school districts, parents, and community members (National Farm to School Network 2017). It is advised to contact local farms early in the spring, so they can plan to plant the ordered vegetables, fruits, and herbs and have them ripe for pickup. The USDA Cooperative Extension Service in your community is a resource for schools and farmers and may be helpful in identifying potential farm/school partnerships. For information on local County Extension office locations, refer to the USDA NIFA website directory (2017). Contact local farmers wishing to provide produce to find out what produce they will be delivering—and the time of the delivery—so that you can schedule processing times to optimize best product quality. Since farming is a business, have a conversation about the cost of the product and clarify that a donation is not expected. Some farms may wish to donate produce, which is, of course, wonderful for schools and communities wishing to save some money.

## Volunteer Workforce

Parent groups, service clubs, and community volunteers will be needed for one to three days, depending on how much produce will be processed. Figure 1 shows a farmer with a fresh, local harvest of broccoli to be processed by community members volunteering for a Fifth Season event.

## Fifth Season Tasks

*Receive*—inspect the produce that is delivered and group like items together.

*Process*—process with appropriate tools and equipment to result in better quality and sizing of the end products (Figure 2). Processing includes cleaning, cutting, blanching, and flash freezing to be readied for long-term freezing.

*Package*—the blanched and cooled produce is bagged or transferred to proper containers for safe storage in the freezer.

*Label*—the package label will include the product name, name of the farm, weight, date, date prepared (Figure 3), and possibly other information, such as location or initials of the volunteer.

*Store*—the processed produce will be stored in a commercial freezer, so it can be served at a later date.



Figure 1. The Fifth Season processes fresh, local produce for serving later in the year. Photo by Scott Bauer, USDA.



Figure 2. A commercial grade food processor (e.g., Robot Coupe) is efficient in cutting and chopping a large volume of produce.



Figure 3. Food is carefully labeled and dated before freezing. Photo by Jack Dyckinga.

## Supplies Needed

- Freezer grade plastic bags (lots of them!)
- Professional food processor machine
- Knives
- Vegetable peelers
- Marking pens
- Aprons
- Gloves
- Food Scale

## Steps to Follow

Cafeteria or school personnel will need to be present to oversee this event. All food handlers and volunteers will need to have food handling permits. The test for a food handler permit can be taken online for a minimal cost. For information on food handler test requirements based on your state refer to food handlers classes online (2017). Practice tests and background information can build confidence in the volunteer worker and ensure that safe food handling practices are followed (Hospitality Training Center 2017; U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services 2017).

*Freezing.* Freezing is one of the simplest and least time-consuming methods of food preservation. For best quality, it is important to follow directions carefully. Color, flavor, and nutritive value can be affected by the freshness of the produce selected, method of preparation and packaging, and conditions of freezing (Raab 2012; Singh 2009). Ample freezer space needs to be available to store the processed and packaged items that have been labeled and dated. Flash freezing small batches of herbs and spices helps to avoid freezer burn.

*Packaging.* Packaging in small batches makes it easier to take out the portion needed for a recipe. Make sure to label and package items according to your local health department requirements. Unallowable food packing and preservation techniques include heating and canning because the inherent character of the product is not retained. The heating process involved in canning changes the agricultural product into a product of a different kind or character (USDA FNS 2011).

Vacuum packing is not typically permitted due to local health department standards. Make certain to verify procedures with the local health department and school administration or other organizations that might be affected.

## Discussion

At the Orcas Island Farm to Cafeteria's Fifth Season program, wonderful fresh, frozen local food is served during fall, winter, and spring months (Figure 4). Kids are eating healthy lunches, while school lunch sales have increased by 35% since the program began (Madie Murray, personal correspondence 2015).

A [twelve-minute informative video](#) provides an excellent overview of the Fifth Season concept and provides a historical perspective.



Figure 4. The bounty of the harvest can be processed and stored with the help of volunteers to be served later in the year.

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