

Creating a Food Atlas for Communities

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Introduction

This guide is to help you develop a **food atlas** (aka food map or food guide) – a guide that provides information to community members about where to find food locally. You can personalize this guide and make it unique. The guidelines are suggestions for the steps you need to think through to develop your food atlas.

Your food atlas will probably include information on all types of food sources your community offers (i.e., food pantries, local grocers, local farmers' markets, etc.). Encourage residents to buy food from local producers as much as possible. When you purchase food, you are making a statement that reflects your values and culture. It is more than what you and your family will eat for the next meal – you are making a choice to strengthen your local environment and economy. Here's how:

- **Helping your local farms and community heritage:** Each time you purchase from a local farmer, you are strengthening your local economy because you are eliminating the “middle man.” This means more of your dollars go back directly to your community. You can ask about the farming practices and know where your food comes from.
- **Helping the environment:** On average, food travels about 1,500 miles from the field to you community. When you choose to buy food locally, you are eliminating the fuel needed to transport

food long distances and excess packaging and processing. You are also supporting farming practices that are more sustainable – gentler on the earth. In doing so, your water quality is protected, there is less soil erosion and greater biodiversity.

- **Local food tastes better:** When food “sits” for long amounts of time – as is common when it is transported long distances – it not only loses flavor but also loses nutrients. Buying food locally means you're eating freshly picked food that is in season. There's nothing tastier nor healthier!



When you create your community's food atlas, you will get to know your community in ways you didn't know it before. Some challenges you will be faced with will include finding and soliciting farmers and businesses for your food atlas and distribution. Don't

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be afraid to change and improvise your atlas on a regular basis. At the end of this document, you are provided with several online resources that can help you with your own food atlas. These are food atlases from other regions across the U.S.

Objectives

- Identify community partners that can be involved in developing a local food guide
- Describe the process of developing a local food guide
- Create examples of programs or classes where the local food guide can be incorporated

Step 1: Identifying Key People in Developing the Food Atlas

Who will be involved in the development of your food atlas? Here are some ideas to think through:

- Key producers
- People who have underground knowledge and networks
- Grower or producer associations
- Political leaders that need to be in the loop
- The Cooperative Extension Service
- Champions of environmental issues
- Farmers' market champions/managers
- Community garden volunteers
- Hospitals
- Health groups
- Social groups
- Religious groups
- School leaders
- Cultural groups
- Hunting and fishing groups
- Grocery stores and food cooperatives
- A few community residents

In helping you identify your team, read through Steps 12-15 to see what things you will need to consider in the distribution and publication of your community food atlas.

Step 2: Your First Big Meeting

- **Elect a lead organizer.** This person should be supportive, have excellent communication skills and attention to detail, possess compassion and be excited about this effort.

- Decide on **how often** you will meet (weekly meetings are ideal in the beginning).
- Identify the **strengths** the members of your group have (i.e, web site development, graphic design, writing skills, calling, fund raising, community connections, etc.).
- Decide on a **geographic region** for your atlas. You will need to concentrate your efforts to locate and contact possible listers and will need to decide who will list, given your purpose identified in Step 3. A defined geographic area will help.
- Determine **how long** you want the food atlas available – a year, multiple years, etc. Remember, the more often you update it, the more work it will be. On the other hand, businesses and farmers come and go. You will want to keep an up-to-date list. You may want to set a tentative time and revise after you reach Steps 7 and 8. One suggestion is to produce a new atlas each year, but for your first issue do not print the year so you have the option rather than the requirement to publish annually.

Step 3: Identify the Purpose of Your Food Atlas

In defining your purpose, you will need to think of the target market featured in the food atlas. A suggested checklist is found in Step 7.

Ask yourself: What food values do you want your food atlas to convey? To help determine this, start by brainstorming with the activity listed below.

Activity: Separate participants into groups of about three to five people (depending on size of group). Have participants list their top **four food values**. Food values are ideas that a person believes strongly about food and would like to carry the message into subsequent generations. For example, one person's food values may include that one should cook with whole foods as often as they can, select organic foods often, have several colors of food on your plate and buy from local farmers as often as they can. Some ideas that people in the past have used included food values pertaining to learning where food comes from, the food and health connection, knowing who is growing your food, sustainability to support and keep a heritage alive, spiritual aspects of food (as they are given to us by the Creator), price and quality, preparing food, social aspects of food, etc. What are your food values?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____

Have participants talk about their listed food values. Chances are, you will start seeing a recurring

theme with a few different ideas. As a group, identify the food values you would like your food atlas to convey. Make sure to describe your food values at the beginning of your food atlas. If your main theme is **local foods**, make sure to define what you consider local foods to be and why it is beneficial for consumers (the introduction can help you get started). If your theme is **healthy foods**, identify what is a healthy food. One suggestion for healthy food is listed below.

A healthy food is a fresh plant or animal product that provides essential nutrients and energy to grow, live and stay healthy while satisfying hunger. It is not processed, or may be minimally processed.

Example:

A fresh whole apple is an example of a healthy food, but not an apple-filled pastry.

A baked whole or cut-up chicken is a healthy food, but not chicken nuggets which have been heavily processed and are high in fat and sodium.

After having this discussion, you should identify and **clearly state the purpose** of your food atlas and have this stated at the beginning of the publication. You may also provide **objectives**. Some examples include: “Be able to connect consumers with farmers” or “Be able to connect consumers with local food resources,” etc.

Based on your purpose, you can now decide **who** will be included in your food atlas. For instance, if your goal is to list local food sources, then you may decide that all producers and vendors of local food are eligible. If your goal is to list healthy foods, then all producers and vendors that sell healthy food, as you have defined it, will be listed. For more ideas, check the list suggested in Step 7.

Step 4: Create Partnerships

Make a list of the partnerships in your community. Consider what your partners will be responsible for contributing. Some things to think about:

- **Listers.** Who will locate and solicit farmers? Who will contact food vendors? You will need someone to track the network of communication to locate food producers and markets. This is the most time-consuming task and it will be best if you can create a network of contacts.
- **Who will organize and keep track of educational programs?**
- **Funding.** Local food benefits the local economy but needs many local supporters. Often food producers are low income and reluctant to invest in

new advertising, even if widely distributed. You will need other supporters of your food atlas in your area. Who has talent in soliciting for this?

- **Distribution.** Who will distribute the food atlas throughout the community? Could they include community groups? You will need connections and labor, possibly volunteers. For more ideas, see Step 14.
- **Point person.** Who will be the lead “point person” to contact regarding the food atlas? This person should be involved with distribution and should be excited about the food atlas.

To get you started, suggestions of community partners include:

- County Extension office
- Colleges and universities
- Local school associations and parent groups
- Hospitals
- Agricultural groups, such as growers’ associations, Future Farmers of America (FFA) or 4-H groups
- Food-related national organizations: Heifer, Buy Fresh, Slow Food, Farm to School
- Food policy council
- Health coalitions
- Religious organizations
- Volunteer groups

Step 5: Create a Database

When you start locating your resources, you will want to enter the information into a database. The larger your food atlas, the more important this will become. Some things to consider:

- **A program that is easy to use**
 - Google docs – a common platform where people can contribute information in one space
 - An Excel spreadsheet (make sure you have a master sheet maintained by one person so you do not get confused by constantly changing documents)
 - A Word document (see comment for Excel spreadsheet above)
- **Copy editors who will verify information.** At some point the document with the data will be transferred to layout form before printing. Sometimes accuracy becomes lost in transfers. A few people will be needed to verify all the information is included and accurate.

Step 6: Construct an Application Form

An application form will need to be filled out by every local food resource listed in the food atlas. Some things to think about when creating an application:

- A hard copy will reach more people but requires a mailing list, envelopes, postage and volunteers to distribute. Some food producers prefer hard copy application forms.
- An electronic listing is easier to enter information into, and there is less chance of error since there is one less step of transferring the information. This requires an electronic mailing list. If you have access to a web site, this may make it easy to reach many people who may otherwise not be contacted. An electronic web site also enables the information to be collected and automatically entered on an Excel sheet for copy to the layout and design of the atlas. This saves the costs of hard copy mailing but requires some knowledge of web site set-up. Some listers prefer electronic application forms.
- For your first time, you may want to try a combination of both hard-copy and electronic applications as you build your list of contacts.
- Do you want a form translated for farmers and vendors who do not speak English?
- Be clear about the information and how you will use it. For example, will you have icons for products, different agricultural practices, how to access the product, open operating hours, web sites, address, etc)
- After you have decided on your purpose for the food atlas, list your definitions on the application so producers and vendors are aware of this. If you want your farmers and producers to pledge to uphold the values, you will need to ask this on your application. Be aware that farmers listed need a consistent pledge of the quality and safety of their product.
- Will you charge an application fee? Unless you have a grant or organization to pay the costs, you will need to solicit for the postage, layout/design, printing and distribution of the food atlas. The initial food atlas may be a few sheets of paper printed or a small foldout map with listings or a booklet.

The University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension has an example of their application form. You can check it out at this link:

<http://www.farmfreshatlas.org/southeast/appfarm.htm>.

If the link is outdated, you can Google “Wisconsin Farm Fresh Atlas” to find a current copy.

Step 7: Identify and Solicit Local Food Resources

Depending on the purpose of your guide, contact the resources (“Pick-your-own” farms, farmers’ market managers, restaurants, grocers, CSAs, etc.) available in your community and send them an application form. A suggested checklist of whom to contact is included below. The contacts will be dependent on who you want as your “target market” to be featured in the food atlas. This is the major portion of your food atlas and will take time and manpower to create. The success and quality of your food atlas is dependent on applications returned.

Something to think about: For producers, consider soliciting information when they have more time (i.e., at peak harvest they will not have the time). You can ask farmers for the contact information for other farmers since local food producers have very informal networks and may be difficult to find. Track farmers who are and are not interested in being included in your food atlas. This will be valuable for future editions and how you approach the farmer. For farmers’ markets, remember that there are formal and informal markets in existence. See if there is a market manager/contact.

Suggested Local Food Resources

Below is a list of possible local food resources. Where applicable, a web site is provided for more information. For more detailed information on how to determine if any of these particular options are in your community, promotion ideas, best practices, resources and how to evaluate, you may contact the Arkansas Coalition for Obesity Prevention. E-mail arkansasobesity@yahoo.com and ask for an electronic copy of the full *Access to Healthy Foods: Creating a Food Atlas Toolkit*. At the time of this printing, the phone numbers and contacts are Joy Rockenbach 501-683-3600 and Arlene Rose 501-661-2135.

- ANGEL Food Ministries,
<http://www.angelfoodministries.com>
- Arkansas Hunters Feeding the Hungry,
<http://www.arkansashunters.org>
- Attracting Grocery Stores to Your Area,
<http://www.community-wealth.org/pdfs/tools/cdcs/tool-policylink-grocery.pdf>
- Community Gardens,
<http://communitygarden.org>

- Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), <http://www.localharvest.org>
- Eats on Feet, <http://eatsonfeets.org>
- Educational gardening, <http://www.kidsgardening.com>
- Farms (side note: some farms have informal farm stands or are willing to sell off-farm, others only sell in farmers' markets but are willing to have people contact them on the farm)
- Farm to School Program, <http://farmtoschool.org>
- Farmers' markets, contact Jodi Hardin (Arkansas Farmers' Markets Association), certifiedarkansas@yahoo.com
- Farmers' markets EBT, <http://www.arhungeralliance.org>
- Food Cooperatives, <http://www.ozarknaturalfoods.com>
- Food pantries/soup kitchens, <http://www.nyccah.org>
- Fresh fruit and vegetable grants to schools, contact Child Nutrition Unit at the Arkansas Department of Education, <http://arkansased.org>
- Gleaning, <http://www.arhungeralliance.org>
- Local Food Events, <http://www.arkansas.com/dining/culinary-quest/invitation.aspx>
- Meals on Wheels/Congregate Meals, (Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Aging and Adult Services), <http://www.arkansas.gov>
- Neighborhood produce delivery trucks, <http://www.farmonwheels.biz>
- Online ordering or mail order food, <http://www.localharvest.org/store>
- Pantry gardens, <http://www.arhungeralliance.org>
- Pick-your-own farms and orchards, <http://www.pickyourown.org>
- Plant an extra row, http://www.gardenwriters.org/html/par/pdfs/10_par_mkt_brochure.pdf

- Potluck Food Rescue, <http://www.potluckfoodrescue.org>
- School Gardens, <http://aggie-horticulture.tamu.edu/kinder/sgardens.html>

Step 8: What Else Do You Want to Include in Your Atlas?

When deciding on how often you will update your guide, you may or may not want to include other items of interest. Decide whether you just want to include a directory of local food resources or whether you want to add other helpful items of interest such as:

- A calendar of special events in the community or at farmers' markets (i.e., cooking demonstrations, kid's tent, music)
- Locations where EBT cards are accepted
- A "what's in season" chart of locally available farm-fresh foods
- A tip sheet on what to bring to a farmers' market (such as cash, checks, bags, carts), best time to arrive, questions to ask your local farmer, how to plan your shopping trip, etc.
- A colorful descriptive visual map of your community
- Photos with reasons why to shop locally dispersed throughout the guide
- Definitions of terms residents may not understand, such as "CSA"



Something to think about: Your community food atlas will be an evolving process. Consider starting small so that residents can have a list of access to local foods quickly. As this project evolves, your food atlas can become more specific and elaborate.

Also, remember that your community is culturally diverse. Include culturally appropriate representation of your community in your guide so residents can identify with it.

Step 9: Decide Whether You Want to Advertise Businesses

Besides having local growers, food pantries, community gardens and others listed in your guide, consider the following:

- **Consider selling space** that will contribute to the publishing costs. This would mean that some local farmers or businesses may have an additional

“marketing” space. Some ideas also include coupons that can be redeemed at local resources.

- **What type of sponsor?** Think about whether you want to limit your sponsors to only local food-related resources or whether you want to expand to other types of businesses that will support the publication (clothing stores, banks, hobby stores, etc.). These sponsors may be related to the purpose of your food atlas in various ways. For instance, there may be an insurance agency that specifically sells to farmers, a clothing store that regularly is part of a “buy local” campaign, etc.
- **All resources pay a small fee.** Another option is to have each listed food resource pay a small fee to have their address and information printed in the Food Atlas (i.e., \$50 per each contact/address, essentially an application fee). However, in doing so, you may want to consider that this may limit the number of available food resources that will connect the consumer to the food.

Step 10: Create Educational Programs and Classes for the Community

Consumers may face many challenges with your new community effort. They may need to redefine their own food values. They may need help with learning how to cook and budget. They may need help with transportation to get to the local food resources, learn how to talk to farmers, learn about food origins, etc. The opportunities for education are endless! Below are some suggestions for educational programs:

- Personal finance programs
- Agriculture programs
- Gardening workshops
- Farmers’ market education
- Food preservation workshops
- Cooking workshops
- Farm to school
- Farm to hospital
- Restaurant and grocer: buy local campaigns
- Food policy/food council
- County fairs
- Sustainable living
- Food system analysis
- Nutrition education that defines terms such as free range, organic, who is the farmer, etc.

It would be helpful to identify a person who will be able to compile a list and track these educational resources and provide copies of the food atlas.

Step 11: Develop a Fund-Raising Plan

You will need to print your food atlas, and this requires money. As your efforts grow, you can consider finding funds for a position to help manage the food atlas project. Here are some things to think about when planning the printing of your food atlas:

- Application fees, different levels for different listers
- Grants
- In-kind donations of labor, equipment, design, printing, etc.
- Major sponsors or underwriters such as health institutions or insurance companies
- Fund-raising activities such as local food events, local businesses, etc.
- Groups that involve sustainability, farmers, cooking, health, etc.

Step 12: Find a Layout and Design Person

You will want to determine how you’d like your food atlas to appear. Do you want single sheets, booklets, brochure, fold-outs? Do you want a map inside? You may have less information in the beginning but as you grow, the layout will become more important. Consider the following professional services when planning the look of your food atlas:

- Graphic artist
- Local cover art
- Students or community artists
- Business or group newsletters, such as local food co-ops

Map locations will help consumers locate their food within their neighborhood or community. This does require a more specific program and addresses or GIS information from the listers. Contact your local agriculture department, rural community and development office, university, college or technical school for assistance.

Decide how you want to use graphics and pictures and have a vision before consulting with the artist.

Step 13: Identify a Publisher

Think about who will publish the food atlas. Here are some suggestions:

- Local publishers of newspapers and magazines
- Printing services
- University print shops

Step 14: Distribution

Determine a distribution plan for getting the food atlas out into the community. Depending on the size of distribution, you may need to identify several regional contact persons who will be able to promote the guide. Here are some things to think about as you devise your distribution plan:

- Will you have a mailing system through special interest groups, agencies or resident mailing list? If so, don't forget to add this to your budget.
- Will you have someone designated to distribute the food atlas? (Consider travel reimbursement costs.)
- Consider locations that will carry the food atlas such as:
 - Libraries
 - Churches
 - Schools
 - Post office
 - Cooperative Extension offices
 - Universities
 - Businesses
 - Restaurants
 - Hospitals, clinics, doctor's/dentist offices
 - Farmers' markets

Have a recordkeeping system of where you distributed the food atlas and how many.

Step 15: Final Stages Before Distribution

Your food atlas is finally finished! But before you package it up and send it out, here are a few tips to consider.

- Have at least three people proofread.
- Determine how the copies will be packaged.
- Where will extra copies be stored? Make sure the storage area is dry and easily accessible. Consider who will have access to the storage area.

Step 16: Assessment

You've just distributed your guide. Now collect reactions to the guide for future planning purposes. If you plan on holding an educational session about the guide, these reactions will be helpful. Make a review of all the components of your food atlas and keep notes for the next version:

- Review the planning and preparation process.
- Review the distribution plan.
- Review roles of partners in planning and implementation.

- Was the purpose and learning objectives adequate?
- Determine timeline for the next guide.
- Determine the point person for the next guide.
- A formal assessment will cost money. An informal assessment will need volunteers. Consider someone who can call farmers and ask if they want to be listed and get positive and negative comments.

Resources

The following resources are examples of food atlases from different parts of the country. Each one has a slightly different approach so check them out.

Wisconsin Regional Farm Fresh Atlas™
www.farmfreshatlas.org

Sustainable Table: A list of national directories
<http://www.sustainabletable.org/shop/guides/regional.php>

Appalachian Local Food Guide (online)
<http://www.buyappalachian.org>

South Dakota
<http://www.Sdlocalfood.org>

Illinois (different way of formatting)
<http://web.extension.illinois.edu/winnebago/downloads/22773.pdf>

New River Valley Virginia
(Takes a long time to download, almost 112 MB)
http://www.hnfe.vt.edu/extension_and_outreach/documents/NRV_local_food_directory.pdf

Philadelphia (click on the local food guide tab)
<http://www.fairfoodphilly.org>

Minnesota Food from Farm to Table Directory
<http://www.fmda.state.mn.us/food.aspx>

This guide was adapted from information provided by Dr. Jasia Steinmetz, RD, CD, from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point at the Society for Nutrition Education 2010 (Reno, NV), "Enhancing your community and practice: A basic primer in creating and using a local food guide."

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