The high cost of fresh produce is a challenge for families with limited incomes. While many of these families would like to grow their own vegetables, they often lack the skills and resources to succeed at doing so. Thanks to the Seed-to-Supper (S2S) program now entering its 4th year at CCE-Tompkins, almost 300 new gardeners from Tompkins and some neighboring counties have learned the skills and received the support they needed to raise fresh produce for their families to enjoy.

Seed-to-Supper is a volunteer-based program to teach low-cost food gardening skills. Originally developed by the Oregon State University Cooperative Extension in partnership with the Oregon Food Bank, the program has been running in Oregon since 2010 and successfully has trained hundreds of volunteers to teach thousands of Oregon residents how to grow their own food.

In 2016, staff from CCE-Tompkins, CCE-Onondaga and Cornell University’s Garden-Based Learning program collaborated to revise the Seed-to-Supper curriculum and resources for use in our New York State climate, and to add links to Cornell resources throughout the student manual.

The third year of offering Seed-to-Supper in Tompkins County was the most successful yet, with increased numbers of sites and participants. Classes were held at host sites in the City of Ithaca and multiple rural locations that serve residents with low-to-moderate incomes. Sites in Ithaca included Hasbrouck Apartments, Southside Community Center, Titus Towers, Women’s Opportunity Center, and the YMCA of Ithaca & Tompkins County. Other Tompkins County host sites were: the Danby Town Hall; Southworth Library in Dryden; Freeville United Methodist Church; Center Village Court Apartments and Groton Public Library in Groton; Lansing Public Library; and Cayuga Meadows Senior Apartments in the Town of Ithaca.

One of the 2018 sites, Cayuga Meadows, provides an example of how Seed-to-Supper classes help new gardeners overcome obstacles and be more successful at growing food, along with developing connections in their community. Cayuga Meadows is a new low-to-moderate income senior apartment complex on Route 96 in the Town of Ithaca. The developers had fenced in a garden site at the complex but the seniors living there did not know how to get started with the garden. A resident contacted CCE-Tompkins for a garden consultation and after learning about Seed-to-Supper classes worked with the Cayuga Meadows administration to be a host site for the classes. Seven residents attended the series of free gardening classes held in their community room starting in early spring. When the snow melted it was revealed that the developers had left very poor, clay soil in the garden that would not be suitable for planting. CCE staff were able to make connections with the Town of Ithaca Department of Public Works, and their staff delivered truckloads of compost and mulch to improve the garden soil. The residents were able to plant tomatoes, peppers, eggplant, strawberries, lettuce and other flowers in their new garden.

Most of the seniors were first-time gardeners and they loved how the garden got them outside and moving and also provided some fresh vegetables. The garden also helped develop friendships between the gardening residents of the new apartment complex. There is still space in the garden for more residents so it’s likely that Seed-to-Supper classes will be held at Cayuga Meadows again in spring 2019 for other new residents.

A senior participant at a Dryden program site shows how the S2S program helps develop community leadership skills along with gardening skills and knowledge. Al, a retiree, had been a participant in the 2017 Seed-to-Supper classes at Poet’s

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1. Participating gardeners by year are: 65 gardeners at 6 locations in 2016, 120 gardeners at 3 locations in 2017, and 103 gardeners in 11 locations in 2018.
Landing, a low-to-moderate income apartment complex in Dryden. Al had stood out then as someone with some existing gardening experience and a lot of enthusiasm for helping others. In 2018, Gardener invited Al to be a Seed-to-Supper facilitator and lead the series of classes at the Southworth Public Library in Dryden, and he excelled in his new role. In addition to leading the classes at the library, Al invited participants to the Poet’s Landing garden to learn hands-on skills. He also became a leader at the Poet’s Landing garden site, helping other residents learn how to plant their raised beds and providing them with his extra plants. Although Al had no experience in grantwriting, he applied for and received a mini-grant from our Tompkins Families! program that provided funds to build additional raised beds at the Poet’s Landing garden site.

“The Seed-to-Supper program is flexible enough to adapt to a variety of different sites,” says Gardener, “and can easily accommodate special needs of hosts and participants.” She offers the following example of how Seed-to-Supper was adapted to meet the needs of FoodNet recipients.

In May 2018, Gardener was contacted by Linda Tallman of FoodNet, an organization that provides free meals for seniors with limited incomes. Linda had heard about the Seed-to-Supper classes and wanted to know if CCE could offer the series at four senior meal sites. At that time, all S2S facilitators were committed to teach at other sites so the FoodNet sites were placed on a waiting list. Because most of the potential participants at the FoodNet sites were apartment dwellers with reduced mobility and little access to garden space, Gardener designed a two-hour workshop on growing different types of salad greens in containers. Facilitators taught the container gardening workshops at Titus Towers and the YMCA in Ithaca, and at Center Court Apartments in Groton. Participants were given free pots, soil, seeds and care instructions and planted mini-salad gardens to grow on their windowsills this winter.

In 2018, Gardener also collaborated with Cornell University’s Seed-to-Supper (S2S) Engaged Learning class to involve students in improving the train-the-trainer portion of the manual. “We had an opportunity to bring four of our seasoned facilitators to a day-long regional training led by the students in Geneva, and we involved those facilitators in developing a new training for Tompkins County S2S volunteers using some of the tools and techniques created by the students,” Gardener reports. They also added a module specifically on hunger and food insecurity in Tompkins County, and rounded out the day of training with hands-on gardening activities to accompany each chapter in the S2S manual. “Other New York Extension offices are interested in offering Seed-to-Supper,” Gardener says. “These new updates should make it more user-friendly and easier for them to implement in their counties.”

Seed-to-Supper will be offered again in Spring 2019. For more information, please contact Jennie Cramer, Horticulture Program Educator at CCE-Tompkins at jrd10@cornell.edu or 607) 272-2292. ☀