In an effort to expand the reach of nutrition education programming, the Des Moines Area Food Bank began their “On-the-Grow” Learning Garden Truck in 2014. Located in the bed of a Ford F-250, the Learning Garden serves the community by meeting them where they are to provide hands-on, engaging nutrition literacy and gardening classes.

South King County, the home of the Des Moines Area Food Bank, has the lowest consumption rates of fruits and vegetables in all of King County. To combat this problem, Kris Van Gasken and Barb Houston-Shimizu of the Des Moines Area Food Bank spearheaded an innovative initiative in 2014, the “On-the-Grow” Learning Garden Truck. The mission of the program was to bring gardening knowledge and nutrition literacy to pockets of the community struggling with healthy food access.

Originally geared at hosting classes for youth at Summer Meals sites, the program has since expanded to reach individuals of all ages across the greater Des Moines, SeaTac, and Normandy Park areas, with a special focus on the four food deserts within these communities. In 2016 the Garden Truck program received a USDA Summer Sunshine Award that recognized their efforts as community leaders in “Brining the Farm to Summer Meals.” Last year alone, the program worked with the Des Moines Senior Center, King County Libraries, the Des Moines Elementary School, the SeaTac Teen Center, and the Des Moines Farmers Market to provide enrichment and learning activities. Since April 2017 the “On-the-Grow” truck has provided 122 classes and served over 3,765 individuals in the greater Des Moines community. With funding from a recently awarded King County Conservation District grant, the program hopes to continue expanding its reach throughout 2018.

Starting a program such as the Learning Garden might seem daunting, both in terms of the financial and personnel commitment. However, the total start-up cost of the “On-the-Grow” Garden was $4,500, which included the “cost” of the truck itself. Luckily for the Des Moines Area Food Bank, the Garden Truck was donated by their local Grainger after it learned of the program’s mission. When speaking with Bridget Kubes, the current Garden Educator, she encouraged hopeful truck garden owners to be prepared with a compelling pitch when approaching prospective truck sellers. Though Kubes was not a part of the Food Bank when the Garden Truck first began, she notes that the community quickly became invested in supporting the project. The program currently receives donations from numerous local gardening organizations such as Seattle Tilth (now the Tilth Alliance) and the Highline Urban Agriculture Department. These days, Kubes does not leave her house without a photo of the truck that she is always prepared to show potential donors whenever she discusses in-kind or monetary contributions.

The Garden Truck lives in the bed of a 1994 Ford F-250. After the truck was acquired, the Des Moines team added weatherproof spray to the truck bed,
covered the bed in landscape fabric, and filled the bed with white pumice, soil, manure, and beach sand. Cleverly, to maximize learning space on the Garden Truck, the Des Moines team added a Lexan wall to the back of the bed, which allows for both participants to see the soil and the Garden Educator to place lesson materials on the tailgate. Kubes notes that access to the tailgate is especially useful for classes with younger children who stand on the tailgate to interact with the garden by prepping soil and harvesting, among other activities. While Kubes prefers to keep the Garden Truck off the Interstate, the truck comfortably travels around Des Moines to Summer Meals sites, schools, libraries, senior and community centers.

Now entering its fourth year of programming, the “On-the-Grow” Truck has been embraced by the Des Moines community, in large part because of its enthusiastic champion and the woman behind the wheel, Bridget Kubes. Kubes came to the Des Moines Area Food Bank in 2016 to oversee program implementation, management, and development for the Garden Truck. With 15 years of experience in program management, and little exposure to growing food, Kubes focused much of her initial energy on absorbing information about effective growing practices and compelling nutrition education courses. Since Kubes began overseeing the Garden Truck, she has worked on developing a “Menu of Classes” that she shares with existing and potential partners to glean their interests. Of the classes she has developed, Kubes’ favorite is, “The Stories that Feed Us,” a course that helps individuals connect with each other around potent food memories. As Kubes’ describes it, “Sharing about food experience helps kids and adults connect to its place in their lives, family, culture, and traditions and helps them to value its place.” Other classes include Kitchen Gardening, Microgreens, and Seed Balls. During the summer months, Kubes’ main goal is to “raise kids that value growing real food,” which she hopes to encourage through her hands-on classes and activities.

Importantly, Kubes continues to use her limited gardening experience to connect and learn with the population she serves. She believes that her role as a learner and a teacher empowers the children (and adults) with whom she works. With each new question that participants ask, Kubes uses herself as an example of what it looks like to learn. This past summer her mantra was, “just put the seed in the soil.” When questioned about her suggestions for organizations hoping to start a Garden Truck, Kubes responded, “Just take it and run with it!” Kubes’ enthusiasm for the program and its participants is contagious; she believes that if you have the resources, you’re willing to be flexible, and you’re open to learning from your mistakes, you should try starting a Learning Garden Truck. In fact, one of the 2018 goals for the “On-the-Grow” Truck is to help others replicate the program. If you are interested in starting your own program, but need help with brainstorming or resource and curriculum development, reach out to Kubes at dmgardentruck@gmail.com.

For more information about starting or developing your farm-to-food bank initiative, please email growingconnections@northwestharvest.org, or contact Laura Titzer at 206.923.7423