For each of the past three years, Pierce County community gardens have donated between 25-30,000 pounds of produce to food banks. Harvest Pierce County and its robust Community Garden Program are the result of years of organizing and planning at the grassroots and policy levels, and building interest in community gardens as spaces for neighborhood revitalization. Between 2010 and 2015 Pierce County added ten community gardens per year, and now has over 75 community gardens. With funding from the Paul G. Allen Foundation, the Share the Harvest program supports community gardens to grow produce for food banks. Harvest Pierce County Program Director Kristin McIvor took a few minutes to talk to Northwest Harvest about Share the Harvest.*

NWH: Tell me about the Community Gardens Program.
KM: The work of community gardens is 20% gardening and 80% community. Our basic model is that all the funding we get pays for staff. The staff facilitate the development of the community gardens and then support them once they are established. Helping citizens in their volunteer capacity to manage a piece of open space together is hard. It’s a lot of work for the volunteers. It’s work for us to figure out how to support them.

Some of the ways that we support Share the Harvest community gardens are by providing plant starts in the spring, giving them scales and bins and templates to help them track how much they grow for the food bank, and then we count their numbers up at the end of the year. We also publish a brochure called Where to Donate? That involves checking in with all 69 food banks in Pierce County each year and asking, what produce do you want, and what produce do you not want? We publish that information along with the food banks’ hours of donation, and then we encourage community gardens to develop a relationship with the food bank that’s going to make sense for them and talk to them about what’s going to work. For a lot of community gardens, growing for the food bank is their organizing purpose.

NWH: How specific to Tacoma/Pierce County is this program? Do you think this is replicable in other parts of the state?
KM: The way the program was funded was unique to Tacoma but I think there is that potential in just about every community. The general approach was finding streams of money that were trying to do the same things that we were, and helping them to see that community gardening does those things for them. The health department was trying to increase physical activity and access to fruits and vegetables; well, we do that. The city of Tacoma wanted strong communities; well this is one way.

*This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.
Develop relationships with the people who manage those budgets and see if you can convince them that community gardens are a legitimate way of doing this. Where people are open to that we’ve had a lot of success, and as success grows, it’s been easier to convince people. In any city, there will be people sympathetic to it early on, and the trick is to find them and then grow the program.

**NWH**: What advice would you give to a food bank that wants to work with a community garden?

**KM**: Food banks need to be really honest about what they can and can’t handle, and not be afraid to say, collard greens don’t fly here, we need bok choy. Because nothing’s more frustrating than taking your hard earned produce to the food bank and not having it be used. The gardener wants information and feedback about what is going to work.

And the trickiest thing for us is the hours that food banks will accept donations. We recognize that food banks are often run by volunteer staff and they can’t just be open around the clock, but if they can work with the community garden to find out what’s going to work, and make that possible, because these are also volunteers driving the food to the food bank on their own time. The food banks that don’t get donations are the ones open Mondays 1-3 for drop-in donations. I know that food banks can’t be 100% flexible, but within their capacity, work with the garden to find out something that’s going to work for everyone.

And then also recognizing that at community gardens it won’t always be the same people. People come and go and people who are in leadership positions get tired and need a break, so things might change, so recognize that hours that worked last year might not work this year, and just understand that it’s another entirely volunteer run entity. So check in every spring about what’s going to work.

**NWH**: I saw that one of the Share the Harvest goals is to foster a culture of generosity at the community gardens. Can you tell me about how you promote this culture?

**KM**: When we have our introductory meeting with a group that’s going to establish a community garden, we talk about all the things that community gardens can be. Community gardens can be generative sites, and if you do it well, there’ll be way more food than what people can eat, so sharing is something that comes naturally to community gardening. We talk about that and it seems to get people excited. The community garden isn’t just a place where they can get their own food needs met, but also a place they can give back. We also work hard to thank and celebrate volunteers. We do an event at the end of the year called the Abun-Dance and we talk about all the food we’ve grown and donated, and thank volunteers.

A couple of stories: A local woman told me that she grew black Crimean tomatoes and took them to the food bank. There were these Russian ladies who saw the tomatoes and cried. That was it for her - she saw how much it mattered to people. There was this other woman who made her first delivery to the food bank this year and she called to tell us that she cried the whole way, it felt so good to have something tangible to do to relieve human suffering.

For more information, see the Share the Harvest Training Guide.