

UI Extension's master gardeners lead project to help bridge food insecurity gap

AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Extension's Canyon County Idaho Master Gardeners partner with local organizations to help mitigate food insecurity in Canyon County and beyond.

The Situation

The lack of access to high-quality fresh produce to maintain a healthy and active life has direct negative impacts on individuals, families and communities. Food insecurity is relatively common; the state of Idaho has a food insecurity rate of 12.7% of the population. Food insecurity occurs when a household cannot access enough food due to a lack of funds or essential resources, including access to grocery stores or fresh produce markets. Nearly 47 million adults and youth are going without a meal on a regular basis. Youth under the age of 18 are even more at risk of food insecurity in the U.S. where nearly 14 million youth are coming up short of enough food to maintain a healthy and active life (Feeding America). The food insecurity rate in Canyon County is 12.5% of the entire population. An estimated 33,362 or more community members experience food insecurity issues throughout the year (Feeding America).

Our Response

In 2022 UI Extension's Canyon County Idaho Master Gardeners started the pilot Foodbank Seedlings Project (FBSP) to help address food insecurity issues throughout Canyon County. Master gardeners approached community partners for access to



Canyon County master gardeners with seedlings for foodbank distributions (Syngenta greenhouse). Photo by Julie Eldredge.

greenhouse space to plant and grow vegetable plants to then distribute to the communities at local foodbanks. Multiple partners were critical to the FBSP with a multitude of donations from College of Western Idaho (CWI), Syngenta, Zamzow's, North End Organic Nursery, UI Extension Canyon County and Hacker Elementary School. Master gardeners of Canyon County used greenhouses for the planting and growing of seedlings from 2022 through 2025 (2022-2023 CWI & 2024-2025 Syngenta, respectively). Seedlings consisted of six plants: tomato, peppers (jalapeno & piquillo varieties), cucumber, basil and marigold. Seedlings are planted in the early spring by Idaho Master Gardeners and collaborators. Master gardeners reached out to local foodbanks for distribution of seedlings, growing pots, soil and educational information

to those facing food insecurity in Canyon County and beyond. Households received a six-pack of seedlings, three growing pots (5-gallon, 3-gallon and 1-gallon), soil and educational information during distribution days. Distribution days were held across Canyon County and the surrounding areas, with 19 total sites and 17 distribution dates during May of 2025. Seed packets are also available during distribution days for summer and fall vegetables; 120 seed packets were distributed to community households for the 2025 project. Seed packets are of selected vegetable species/varieties that could be planted during mid-to-late May.

Program Outcomes

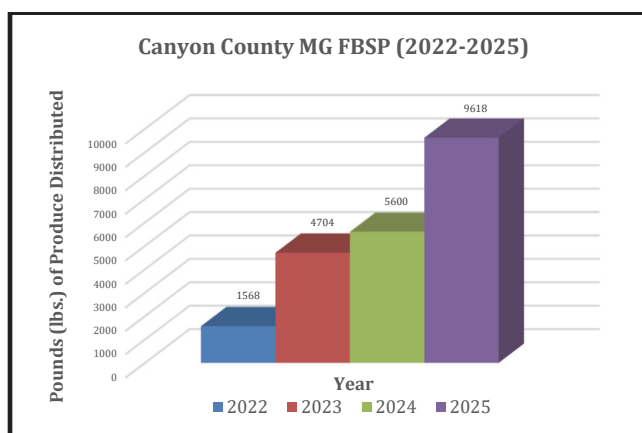
Seedlings, pots, soil and educational information have been distributed to more than 1,800 individual households in Canyon County and beyond to date from the master gardeners FBSP during foodbank distribution days (2022-2025). Of individual participants that attended a food bank distribution in May of 2025, 84% took home a six-pack of seedlings, pots, soil and educational information to grow their own fresh produce at their residence. A total of 9,341 seedlings have been planted, grown and distributed through the FBSP to households that are experiencing food insecurity in Canyon County and beyond. Conservatively estimating the yield of these seedlings shows the FBSP has helped curb food insecurity in Canyon County and beyond by donating an astonishing 21,490 lbs. of fresh produce to households from 2022 through 2025, given that each six-pack of seedlings would yield 14 lbs. of fresh produce. By equating the lbs. of fresh produce to meals and economic value (1.2 lbs./one meal, Food Rescue U.S.) (\$1.89/lb. fresh produce, ProducePay), the FBSP has donated over 17,900 meals at a value of more than \$40,000 to Canyon County and beyond from 2022-2025. Fresh produce is a vital source of vitamins, minerals, fiber and nutrient-rich food. Fresh produce access has been directly increased in Canyon County and beyond by the FBSP, increasing communities physical and mental health, well-being and helping food

insecurity issues in southern Idaho by volunteering for this special community project.

Seedling/Plant	Fresh Produce (lbs)
Tomato (Celebrity)	5 lbs.
Pepper (Jalapeno)	2 lbs.
Pepper (Piquillo)	2 lbs.
Cucumber (Space-master/Quick snack)	4 lbs.
Basil	1 lb.
Marigold	0 lb.
TOTAL	14 lbs.

The Future

The Canyon County Idaho Master Gardeners Foodbank Seedlings Project plans to extend the project's reach by increasing distribution to additional food banks, pantries and community gardens in Canyon County and beyond. Scheduling container garden classes or workshops in conjunction with foodbank distribution days, including in Spanish, would help households suffering from food insecurity and underserved audiences. Canyon County master gardeners will continue this community project into 2026 and beyond.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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