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## Grow your food stamps – Learn how

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By Hayley Currier

What's the difference between food and nutrition?

The United States government is attempting to grapple with this question, as seen in the October 2008 renaming of the federal Food Stamp Program which is now SNAP—Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. The government is no longer, at least in name, just supplementing the purchase of food for low-income residents. They are supposed to be supplementing nutrition, somewhat of a different story.

A new wave of research and projects are questioning if all calories are created equal—enough food is not the same as enough nutrients. Processed and sugar-laden food—the cheapest option for many on food stamps—may be causing more problems than they are solving. Organizations like the Center for Weight and Health through the University of California, Berkeley are advocating for changes that encourage people to eat healthier. Globally, more people are suffering from obesity and related illnesses than undernourishment. Olivier De Schutter, UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, speaks strongly about the need to improve unhealthy diets on an international scale and calls for measures such as taxing unhealthy food and regulating food advertising. Evidence is mounting that we shouldn't just talk about filling bellies any more, but what we are filling them with.

The renaming of SNAP indicates that the USDA is finally waking up to the mounting health crisis caused by empty calories. Research on whether food stamps contribute to obesity is not new, and a recent Ohio State University study showed that the longer someone is on food stamps, the higher the BMI rises in comparison to those not on food stamps. However, with some innovative thinking, SNAP also has the potential to combat obesity-related diseases. New energy is being pumped into this decades-old program. Food stamps could always be used to buy fruits and vegetables, but now double-voucher programs are being tested with great success at farmers' markets across the country. This encourages low-income residents to buy local, organic and healthy produce instead of unhealthy processed packaged food, by doubling their purchasing power when purchasing from local farmers' markets. This supports local farmers while giving low-income residents better access to healthy food.

Another old idea made new again is using food stamp funds to grow food. Though not widely promoted, food

stamp funds have been available since 1973 to buy seeds and plants for starting a personal garden.

This is no surprise to SNAP Gardens, a new initiative started by Daniel Bowman Simon to promote the fact that SNAP funds may be used to purchase food-producing plants and seeds. If you use the \$5.00 you spent on tomatoes to instead buy a tomato plant, your \$5.00 gets you dozens of tomatoes. With over 45,000,000 Americans on food stamps, that's a lot of tomatoes.

Simon is trying to tackle this awareness gap by starting at farmers' markets. He sends promotional posters in any language requested, from Spanish to Cherokee to Hmong, to be hung in markets to inform SNAP consumers of their options. Since April 2011, 124 markets have already requested posters. By buying plants, consumers get more food for less money, enabling them to "grow their SNAP dollars." And by selling plants, the farmers get extra income earlier in the growing season and create new and often long-standing relationships with their customers.

This SNAP creativity is inspiring. However, the fact remains that the number of people receiving SNAP aid is growing every month. One must not allow innovation to overshadow the fact that this food aid represents a much larger economic problem.

**Join Daniel Bowman Simon for a Webinar on SNAP Gardens on Wednesday, October 26th through the USDA's People's Gardens Initiative.**

[Snap Gardens website](#)

[Hunger and obesity.](#)

[Olivier De Schutter](#)

[Food Stamp Match program.](#)

[Growing food with food stamps](#)

[Using food stamps to grow good food](#)

[Farmers' Market Coalition](#)

[USDA information on canning, seed saving, bee keeping, and extending the growing season.](#)



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