

Tu Bishvat Interview: Daniel Bowman Simon on “Growing Food Stamps” with SNAP Gardens

by [Leah Koenig](#) | February 8, 2012 | [1 comment](#)

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Over the last decade, the ideas of eating local, supporting small farmers and growing one's own produce have skyrocketed in popularity. But for the 46 million Americans who depend on food stamps (now called the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – or [SNAP](#)) to put food on their tables, finding access to sustainable, healthy food can be a challenge.

Now, a program called [SNAP Gardens](#) is helping to make growing one's own food a little easier. Thanks to a little-known amendment to the Food Stamp Act, SNAP benefits can be used to purchase seeds and plants for home or community gardening. (Pretty cool, right?) SNAP Gardens works to raise awareness and empower people to “Grow their Food Stamps” into fresh, delicious food. Find out more here:

SNAP Gardens founder, Daniel Bowman Simon, has a history of creating successful food programs – most recently the [White House Organic Farm](#) project, which played a part in inspiring the educational food garden planted at the White House. SNAP Gardens takes the ideas of healthy, fresh food for all from the White House to the streets (and more specifically gardens) across the country. Daniel took the time to let us know how it works, and how people, schools, and synagogues can help their effort. Read the interview below the jump:

When did the Amendment that allows people to purchase plants and seeds with food stamps get passed?

Believe it or not, it's been around since 1973. The Food Stamp Act itself was passed in 1964, and then 9 years later the amendment was passed. Our website has a really detailed [history section](#) where people can read the full story.

What are some current challenges that SNAP Gardens is working to address?

Availability of seeds and plants at SNAP retailers and just plain spreading the word two of the biggest hurdles. A lot of farmers' markets take food stamps and carry seeds and plants, but most people don't know they can use their benefit cards to purchase them – and lots of farmers don't realize this either! On the other side, while many grocery stores carry seeds, there is still a gap in availability. We are doing our best to spread the word on both ends.

How are you helping to spread the word?

I have met people at community gardens who are on food stamps, and when I tell them about this their eyes bulge and they say, "What? How come I've never heard of this?" So we've created [some posters](#) in both English and Spanish that educate people on how to "grow their food stamps." People request the posters [[request one here](#)] for their gardens and neighborhoods and slowly it helps to raise awareness.

What are some other projects SNAP Gardens is working on?

Thanks to a recent mini-grant from [Awesome Food](#), in the coming year we will also be starting up a toll-free information hotline for interested gardeners. And last fall, we facilitated the construction of a hoop house at a high school in Central Brooklyn. The hoop house will be used to grow seedlings for sale at the farmers market! We are hoping to prove that this is an adaptable model all across the country.

Are there any limitations on what types of gardening supplies you can get with benefits?

You can buy seeds and plants, but you cannot buy other supplies like fertilizer or watering tins. That's where a SNAP Gardens charitable giving event – a school or synagogue campaign to raise money for these other gardening supplies – could be a great companion program.

How else can people get involved with SNAP Gardens?

SNAP gardens has something to offer everyone, whether it's volunteering a particular

skill or doing something with a congregation or school. Every synagogue has a program to help feed the hungry, and now there's this opportunity to connect people to the resources they need to help feed themselves.

One thing a person could do is help curate a seed order for a community. If someone identified the need and desire for seeds and plants in a community and placed a special order with a grocery store, supermarket or corner store, they could help facilitate it. Logistically, it would kind of be like selling Girl Scout Cookies. Or they could also pick 10 retailers in their area, or find a community garden nearby and make sure they know about this program.

This work absolutely needs the energy and commitment of lots of people working together to succeed. Over the next year, we will be working hard to spread the word even further and we completely welcome anyone's ideas, energy and support.

Read more about SNAP Gardens over at Grist.org. And to find out how you can directly volunteer or donate to SNAP Gardens, [click here](#).

[Daniel Bowman Simon](#), [food](#), [Food Stamp Act](#), [food stamps](#), [fresh](#), [healthy](#), [SNAP Gardens](#), [sustainability](#), [White House Organic Farm](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Leah Koenig is a freelance writer and editor whose work has appeared in The New York Times Magazine, Saveur, Every Day with Rachael Ray, Hadassah Magazine, Lilith, Edible Brooklyn and Beliefnet. She contributes a monthly column on food to The Forward and a bi-weekly column to Saveur.com. She is also the former editor of Hazon's award-winning blog, The Jew & The Carrot. Leah joined Repair the World as a contributing editor in late 2009.