

## SNAP Gardens: Turning Food Stamps into Bountiful Gardens

HAVE FAITH. END HUNGER.



Daniel Bowman Simon founded SNAP Gardens earlier this year to let SNAP participants know that they can buy seeds with their benefits. Photo courtesy of Daniel Bowman Simon.

Earlier this year, New York City-based gardening advocate Daniel Bowman Simon remembered a woman he had met in a farmers market in 2008 who told him that she was on food stamps and was using some of her benefits to buy seedlings for gardening. Simon did some research and found that in 1973 an amendment was made to the 1964 Food Stamp Act that allowed participants to use their benefits to purchase seeds and food-producing plants.

Today, the food stamp program is called [SNAP](#), or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, and the 1973 amendment still applies. SNAP participants can indeed use their benefits to purchase seeds and grow a garden for their family.

Simon decided that more people needed to know about this benefit and began [SNAP Gardens](#), which aims to raise awareness among SNAP recipients, gardeners, and the general public through beautifully designed [posters](#), [toolkits](#), and a short [how-to video](#) on easy gardening. SNAP Gardens recently received an [Awesome Food grant](#) of \$1,000 to further its efforts.

I spoke with Simon on the phone this morning to get the lowdown on SNAP Gardens, why he started it, and what his plans are for the future. Read the interview below:

### What was your inspiration for starting SNAP Gardens?

In 2008, I was at a farmers market and a woman approached me. She knew I was a garden advocate and she said that she was on food stamps and she was using some of her benefits to buy seedlings, but she didn't know anybody else using their benefits that way. I said I'd get the word out. I started to look around and realized that it wasn't anything that other groups seemed to be promoting. People around me who were gardeners didn't know about this. People who were in food stamps didn't know, and some people who I knew on the bureaucratic side didn't know. So I thought maybe I should really focus on getting the word out and helping tell people it's possible to garden, to grow some of their own food.

### How do people respond when you tell them they can buy seeds and seedlings with their SNAP benefits?

A lot of people are surprised and I've met some people who are already interested gardeners and are on food stamps, and they say, how come nobody told me about this? The response has been overwhelmingly positive.

## What is your vision for SNAP Gardens? What do you hope to accomplish?

This project is based on putting the spotlight on one piece of a much, much bigger program. The [nature of SNAP](#) is that it's a program where people can make their own choices of what they want to do ... so I'm putting useful information out there. I have gotten reports back from a few farmers markets in particular that they've definitely seen more people using SNAP for buying seedlings at the farmers markets now that they have the awareness.

It is still the case that people can buy plants. And although more expensive than seeds, plants offer a few advantages to seeds. Seedlings/plants have already germinated, which means one less step -- which can be a complicated step for some plant varieties. Also, seedlings/plants are closer to harvest than seeds, which means food will be on the table sooner!

## Why would people buy seeds and seedlings with their benefits when they can buy already grown food?

That's a fair question (laughing). If you're trying to eat today, and you're hungry -- to wait a while doesn't necessarily seem like the most intuitive thing. But the way SNAP works, someone can decide if they want to start with one plant or two plants, so they can make a small decision and see if that works. But if gardening is successful, a seed investment can provide a higher return on the investment. There's an abundance that can be created and there's a sense of pride that can emerge, and some added beauty.

Another thing that people don't realize about SNAP is that [benefits usually run out](#) before the end of the month, but they are like cell phone minutes, so they can roll over. If you get a garden in and are not exhausting all of your benefits during months when the garden is productive, then they are accumulating more benefits that they can use when their garden isn't productive.

Lastly, gardening is an activity that can help build community. For a lot of churches, synagogues, and other faith-based locations, gardens are a way to use some of the other resources that gardening requires that a church congregation might already have and build up more connection between members.

## Can you share a story of a person who has been impacted by the work of SNAP Gardens?

I've known a woman who has been gardening for 40 years. I got an email from her and she said, "I just called a friend on food stamps and asked her if she knew about this, and she was really excited." This kind of word-of-mouth is great for people to find out what they need to know about gardening with food stamps.

What comes to mind is a great quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson. He says, "A great fact of much import to the new philosophical opinions is the garden discovery that a potato put into a hole, in six weeks becomes ten. This is the miracle of the multiplication of loaves."



*Jeannie Choi is associate editor of Bread for the World. To learn more about SNAP Gardens, [visit their website](#).*

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