

Urban, home gardens could help curb food insecurity, health problems

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Food deserts are an increasingly recognized problem in the United States, but a new study from the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* indicates urban and home gardens—combined with nutrition education—could be a path toward correcting that disadvantage.

Researchers from the University of California at San Francisco partnered with Valley Verde, a community-based urban garden organization in Santa Clara County, California, to better understand participants' perceptions of the health benefits and acceptability of urban home [gardening](#) programs. Interest in such programs has been on the rise, and this is a critical next step before beginning large-scale trials of how effective they are.

"This home-based model can play a vital role in urban agriculture and has the potential to directly impact health by tying the garden to the household," said lead author Kartika Palar, Ph.D., Department of Medicine, University of California San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, USA. She added that home and [community gardens](#) are complementary approaches to [urban agriculture](#), together promoting a more resilient local food system.

Researchers followed 32 participants—mostly Hispanic/Latinos and women—in Valley Verde's gardening program for one year. The program serves a predominantly [low-income](#) and [immigrant population](#), providing them with the knowledge, skills and tools needed to grow their own organic vegetable gardens.

Valley Verde staff provided 10 monthly workshops for each participant focused on organic gardening skills building as well as nutritional education, like strategies to increase vegetable, fruit and whole-grain intake; healthy shopping strategies; and culturally preferred healthy recipes.

Participants were interviewed before, during and after the program to track what they learned and how they were implementing it. Nearly every participant indicated they ate more vegetables and fruits because of the program, citing increased affordability, accessibility, freshness, flavor and convenience of the garden produce.

"We had some delicious meals with lots of peas because the winter peas were doing really well, and then we could just draw on that when you're out of options," a 47-year-old female participant said in the study, describing how the garden helped during times of the month when money ran low. "[Fruits and vegetables] are a more steady supply. Yeah, it isn't like, 'Oh guess what? In this pay period we can actually afford some salad.' Now we just go and just harvest it and just have it all the time."

"I value more the things that I cook, and the things that I get from my garden, over the things I buy," a 34-year-old male participant said in the study. "There's a big difference....I feel good that I grew it and I am eating something that I grew. So for me, it's priceless."

Participants also frequently described having less stress, as well as a rise in exercise and drop in sedentary behavior both for adults and children. Tending the garden led to more physical activity because of the need to water, weed, harvest and plant at regular intervals.

The study suggests an urban gardening model that integrates home gardening with culturally appropriate nutrition and gardening education has the potential to improve a range of health behaviors that are critical to preventing and managing chronic disease, especially among low-income, urban Hispanic/Latino households.

"Urban agriculture is an important community resource that may contribute not only to nutrition and health, but also to urban development and

social connection," said Dr. Sheri Weiser, MD, the senior author of the study. She added that combining urban home gardening with [nutrition education](#) is an innovative strategy to help to reduce the burden of preventable diseases, such as diabetes, in low-income populations with limited access to healthy food.

More information: Kartika Palar et al, Nutrition and Health Improvements After Participation in an Urban Home Garden Program, *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior* (2019). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jneb.2019.06.028](#)

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