



# Latino farmers and local multicultural food and marketing systems

**Abstract:** Iowa needs a new generation of community-scale organic and sustainable farmers and market gardeners. Two different approaches were used in two communities with significant immigrant populations (Marshalltown and Denison) to assist these groups of farmers.

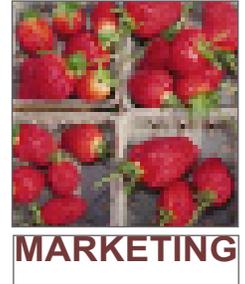
## Principal Investigator:

**Jan Flora**  
Sociology  
Iowa State University

**Budget:**  
\$40,880 for year one  
\$20,883 for year two

**Q** Can programs be devised that incorporate (Latino) immigrant farmers and gardeners into local food systems in Iowa and what can we learn about the process that will inform future efforts in Iowa?

**A** This two-year project launched a new generation of community-scale organic and sustainable farmers and market gardeners in Iowa by trying two different approaches in two communities with substantial immigrant populations.



**MARKETING**

## Background

Collaboration to build and strengthen local food systems that feature multicultural value chains underpins this project. Researchers attempted to link Latino organizing efforts with grassroots planning for local food systems. This included bringing new vegetable/specialty growers (immigrant and native-born) together with experienced local growers and professionals; establishing a bilingual farmer training program with opportunity to rent plots for organic production at a reasonable rate; and planning and developing marketing systems that link these small-scale growers with local consumers looking for healthy, locally grown produce.

Leopold Center funds were used for three segments of a larger project:

- Support for a coordinator to bring together Marshalltown-area partners and encourage immigrants to consider farming and community members to establish a local food system;
- Matching funding for a person to manage the organic farm operated by Marshalltown Community College (MCC), an operation that would serve as a farming business incubator and site of hands-on training opportunities for interested farmers; and
- Hiring a coordinator in the Denison area to bring together local partners to plan and execute a process to encourage community gardeners to become market gardeners.

## Approach and methods

In Marshalltown, the project included a bilingual organic farmer training program offered in winter 2009 at Marshalltown Community College. ISU sociology students and the Marshalltown Chamber of Commerce surveyed local businesses to assess the market for locally-produced food. Seventeen students completed the language training and 12 began farming at the MCC organic farm in the 2009 season. The class was repeated in 2010 with similar numbers and diversity of students.

In Denison, organizers worked with Latino immigrants recruited to the Community Gardens through collaboration with Farmland Foods and the city of Denison, which

provided land and water for the gardens. In 2009 there were only two empty plots of the 20 offered for gardening. The number and size of plots were expanded in 2010.

## **Results and discussion**

The Marshalltown group sold produce at the Des Moines Farmers Market in 2009 and one person experimented with sales to retailers in Marshalltown and Ames. Partners in the Marshalltown work held a series of four community meetings that culminated in the November 2009 establishment of a local foods organization called Harvest from the Heart of Iowa. The group published a local food directory for the area within 30 miles of Marshalltown. Educational and fundraising activities are underway as well.

In Denison, not one community gardener sold any produce. It was all consumed at home or given away to family and friends. Research by a sociology graduate student (who also coordinated the Denison effort) confirmed that the group's cultural values related to growing things and sharing them made selling the produce a much lower priority. However, the collaboration of local organizations in the community gardens project was so strong and enthusiastic that the ISU team will relinquish its role and allow the effort to be organized entirely by local partners.

## **Conclusions**

Project evaluator Mary Emery concludes in her final assessment: "The Latino Farmers and Local Multicultural Food and Marketing Systems Project offers two successful examples of how to engage Latino/immigrants in farming/gardening. The results of the project not only are better food and access to foods for Latino/immigrant populations, but also increased trust and communication across language and cultural divides. Each pilot was organized and supported by a local planning group made up of key agencies and organizations with the help of ISU faculty and students. Iowa State University Extension played a key role in each of the projects. As communities and community leaders struggle with how to bridge cultures in our rapidly changing environment, this project with its focus on a specific intervention, shows how a small success has the potential to ripple across the community and build bridges across language and cultural barriers."

The project leaders say that the community gardens effort in Denison calls into question the efficiency and efficacy of encouraging community gardeners to become market gardeners—at least in the short term. This does not appear to be a quick way of recruiting market gardeners who might later become diversified farmers. This generalization appears to be true for Latino (immigrant) community gardeners, but may apply more broadly. Rather, it appears to be more appropriate to embrace the interest they have in producing food for their family and friends, and seek ways to measure the positive effect that expansion of community gardening can have in other areas—an important finding.

## **Impact of results**

One impact was the successful transfer of coordinating efforts for the project from the project leaders to food systems leadership teams in each community. Latinos and immigrants make up a significant portion of the teams.

The survey of 30 local retailers in the Marshalltown area to determine who would be interested in buying local food yielded information that more than 50 percent had bought products from local farmers and 73 percent would like to have opportunities to purchase from local growers. Harvest from the Heart of Iowa completed a directory of local producers.

Because of the downsizing of ISU Extension, it makes sense to utilize existing vegetable and small diversified farmers as technical assistance providers to beginning farmers, but it will take some time to build those relationships and provide incentives for participation.

The experience with the community garden in Denison suggests that the reasons Latino immigrants grow vegetables are much more complex than the project organizers anticipated, involving social and cultural capital first, with financial capital as a lower priority.

At the mid-term point in the project, participants commented on the need for more Latino involvement in leadership at both sites, and the need to encourage entrepreneurship and collective marketing opportunities. These remain significant challenges.

The meaning for Iowa farmers lies in the following:

- Bilingual, bicultural training for beginning farmers is indeed feasible in Iowa.
- The first multicultural farm incubator was launched in Iowa, demonstrating the viability of this model as one pathway for immigrants and native Iowans to become small-scale producers of high value crops.
- From the Denison experience, it was learned that among immigrant community gardeners there may be cultural resistance to conversion to market gardening, but that there are positive cultural, social and (likely) nutritional outcomes of increasing production for family and friends, particularly in terms of strengthening bonds both within and between different ethnic groups.

## Education and outreach

The project hosted several tour groups and field days. Among them were 40 people from the National Sustainable Agriculture Education Conference, a Practical Farmers of Iowa open house, and 21 people from the Community Food Security Coalition conference. Presentations were given on WOI-Radio, and at the 2009 National Small Farm conference and the Community Food Security Coalition conference.

## Leveraged funds

Leopold Center funds were used as matches for three additional grants: 1) Grants of \$12,500 each from Martha Ellen Tye Foundation and from the Iowa Foundation for Education, Environment and the Arts. 2) National Immigrant Farmer Initiative, “Scaling up to Market: Building Capacity among Immigrant Community Gardeners,” M&M RC&D, \$15,779. 3) Organic Farming Research Foundation, to Marshalltown Community College, Marshalltown, Iowa, \$10,500.

**For more information,  
contact:**

*Jan Flora, Sociology,  
Iowa State University,  
317D East Hall, Ames,  
Iowa 50011; (515) 294-  
4295, e-mail floraj@  
iastate.edu*