

# SPREADING THE LOVE, ORGANICALLY

Grow to Share program gives every socioeconomic level access to local, fresh, organic food.

BY KATE LAPIDES

**G**ROW IT. THEN SHARE IT. High Country Conservation Center's (HC3) Grow to Share program couldn't be more aptly named. In 2016, the program provided 360 low-income Summit County families with fresh, organic vegetables from their community gardens between mid-July and mid-October. The organization partners with Summit County Women, Infants and Children (WIC) and the Family Intercultural Resource Center (FIRC) food bank to ensure that families not only receive fresh produce, but know how to prepare it—and understand the nutritional benefits of eating food that's fresh and local.

"We hope that armed with new knowledge about local food, families will make different

choices at home and perhaps even start a garden of their own," says HC3 Program Director Jessie Burley.

Since one of the program's goals is to encourage recipients to become involved in gardening, Grow to Share partakers not only receive local food, many also help grow it. Families water and harvest produce and help build new garden spaces.

Access to reliable transportation is a challenge for many Grow to Share recipients, so the program brings the food to them.

"High Country Conservation, WIC, and FIRC volunteers, as well as home gardeners, help transport the food from our gardens and farm to the WIC and FIRC for pick-up," says Burley.

"In 2017, WIC was granted permission to do office visits in the Dillon Valley Elementary Garden where we see a lot of families participating in the program. The ability to serve people in their own neighborhood was a huge improvement that we hope to grow in 2018."

"We are very grateful for the program," says one Dillon Valley recipient. "My kids had a whole new excitement for fresh greens, and couldn't wait to eat them after harvesting. They can't wait to plant, watch them grow and finally harvest and eat. The whole process is magical for them."

Grow to Share is just one of numerous HC3 gardening programs in Summit County. The organization oversees six community gardens and has operated a farm-share program called Sum-



Summit County WIC Director Whitney Horner educates food recipients about peas

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mit CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) since 2012. The first year, the program produced 25 shares at its farm at Nancy's Place near the Senior Center in Frisco which served approximately 75 people. In 2016, thanks to three additional greenhouses near the Frisco Transfer Station, the program expanded to 75 shares serving 225 people.


Growing all these vegetables at an elevation of 9,200 feet is a challenge. HC3 partners with farming guru Kyla LaPlante to extend the short Summit County growing season. Since the greenhouses aren't heated, LaPlante gets creative with mini hoop houses, frost cloths and solar pods to grow vegetables ranging from beets to kale to potatoes.

The most important factor in growing at high elevation, says Burley, "is to choose the right crops for our growing region and then save the seed year after year to produce a hardy crop tolerable of high altitude, cooler temperatures and high UV. One day, we'll have our own Summit County crop varieties."

Growing sustainable food and spreading it throughout Summit County is just one area where HC3 focuses its work. The organization actually started as a volunteer-run recycling program called the Summit Recycling Project (SRP) in 1976 by then Summit County local Tim McClure. It flourished for seven years, until a lack of funding forced the organization to close in 1983. In 1989, Bob and Rose Wentzell revived SRP, running two centers that accepted recycling one day per week. Financial stability for the recycling program came when Summit County Government folded SRP's recycling operations into a stable government department.

From these humble beginnings the nonprofit has bloomed. It changed its name to the High Country Conservation Center and expanded its operations to address other resource conservation issues, including energy and water conservation. How to ensure that all this sustainability awareness continues in the years to come? HC3 offers educational programs in energy and water conservation in the schools to cultivate a sense of stewardship in the next crop of Summit Countians.

"The vision of HC3 is to create a culture of environmental stewardship among locals and visitors," says Executive Director Jen Schenk. "We want to inspire people to take action to protect our mountain community for future generations."

Learn more at [highcountryconservation.org](http://highcountryconservation.org). 



The geodesic dome at Dillon Valley Elementary School sources food for Grow to Share recipients



Grow to Share kids get a lesson from Horner about the nutritional benefits of carrots