



**BIZ HARNEY**  
*Opportunity*  
**COLLABORATIVE**

# Feeding Harney County by Supporting Locally Grown Food

Harney Food Systems is working to make sure growers have the resources they need

By Lauren Brown  
September 2024

Harney County is considered a “food desert” or an area that has limited access to food that is plentiful, affordable and nutritious, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Economic Research Service.

Characteristics of food deserts include low access to grocery stores with at least 33 percent of the population living 10 or more miles away from a grocery store in rural areas and areas with a poverty rate of 20 percent or greater.

Harney Food Systems, an initiative of the Biz Harney Opportunity Collaborative of the High Desert Partnership, is trying to mitigate that designation.

Kellie Frank is the Food Systems Coordinator and over the last year, the group has been working to provide better local access to fresh and healthy food. “We’re a group of community members from all walks of life. We gather to discuss major areas of food focus and sustainability in Harney County,” she said.

It is difficult to grow food here. “Harney County, unfortunately, has one of the shortest growing seasons in the state with only a 90-day growing season, and that is during a good year,” Frank said. She noted that it is important to have the ability to grow food locally in case of a disaster. The recent pandemic provided that possibility. “With COVID, what if trucks with fresh produce had stopped coming to Harney County?” Frank asked. “We want to provide higher quality fresh food access, greater food security, less reliance on imported food, particularly during disasters, collaboration and partnership in the community, and provide education and knowledge surrounding homesteading, food preservation and self-reliance.”

To accomplish these objectives, Harney Food Systems has several irons in the fire.

## Harvest Festival and Seed Swap

Harney Food Systems will host the Harvest Festival on Sept. 21 at the Harney County Fairgrounds. The festival features local vendors, provides great food and creates a fun family experience for Harney County. “Our vendors always do a great job providing great seasonal products. For example, last year Brightside Floral had lots of mums and fall flowers. Rick Knox provided bee boxes and woodworking projects. The Burns Science Club sold garlic, another vendor sold carmel apples, and fresh pressed apple cider was available for all,” Frank said.

The Harvest Festival will also include a petting zoo and other kid-friendly activities. “The vendors usually bring produce and mums, and things to get everybody excited about fall. There were pumpkins last year, so kids could go pick a pumpkin.”

In the spring, Harney Food Systems hosts the Seed Swap. While the main event is to bring seeds to trade and share, there are also vendors that provide food as well as seed starts. “There are always lots of seeds, so it’s not a requirement that you bring seeds for the seed swap,” Frank said. “All of these events we do are free to the



public. We ask that you bring a canned food item as your entry to the event, and then we donate that to the food bank.”

At events such as these, Harney Food Systems like to showcase local food vendors such as Tacos El Charro, a food truck at The Palace in downtown Burns and Fresh Start Café, also located downtown. “We had Fresh Start cater one of our Biz Harney meetings,” Frank said.

These events are an opportunity to see what locals have to offer and to learn more about Harney Food Systems. “We just want people to come and learn more about what we’re doing as the food systems group and what options there are and find some ways to teach them to grow their own food,” Frank said.

### **CSA Boxes and Farm to School**



Harney Food Systems is funded through grants. One specific grant from the Oregon Food Bank funds the Community Shared Agriculture (CSA) boxes that are handed out through the food bank on Wednesday mornings.

The Hub, also known as the Harney County Senior Center, donated the land for the community garden where they have raised beds. The High Desert Partnership pays for the water and then seed starts and irrigation equipment were donated to grow vegetables. Additionally, 10 local growers received funds to grow vegetables for the boxes. Members of the Harney Food Systems group meet weekly to assemble the boxes. A recent box included cherry tomatoes, peppers, beans and corn. Doverspike Beef as well as eggs and pork from Rural Roots Ranch have also gone in the boxes.

Harney Food Systems has recently gotten involved with the Farm to School program and in August, hosted a training with eligible schools and local growers to try and get more fresh food into school lunches.

### **Educational Classes**

Frank said she is always looking for more growers, noting that the senior center purchases food weekly from local growers. “We just need more growers, so I’m actively looking for more people who would be interested in selling some of their produce or growing more, so that we can continue to build on this,” she said.

To help in that goal, the group has offered classes to teach people how to extend the growing season in Harney County. They will partner with Oregon State University Extension this fall to teach classes on canning and food

preservation. In the future, they would like to provide cooking classes. “We really want to use some of the food that we’re growing in the community garden to do demonstrations,” Frank said.

Educational classes on food preservation with Tori Gardner, a nutritionist from Harney District Hospital, and on sourdough will take place during the Harney County Fair.

In addition, Frank said the group is working on projects with the Oregon Food Bank and Travel Oregon. Harney Food Systems has also been working closely with the Burns Paiute Tribe to help get their community garden up and running.

### **Made in Harney**

This year at the Harney County Fair, the Harney brand will be introduced. Developing this brand has been a multiple year effort of the Biz Harney Opportunity Collaborative and many community members. Through interviews, conversations, discussions and focus groups, Harney County residents said this is who we are, this is what we value and these are our hopes. Some of the concepts attached to the brand include cherishing wide open spaces and natural resources; living close to the land; helping neighbors and accepting help in return.



To promote these ideas, Harney Food Systems hosted a Made in Harney long table dinner at The Palace in July. The dinner featured food grown in Harney County. “The idea is that Harney County has so many wonderful things to offer, and it’s such a beautiful place, and there are some really unique things about it,” Frank said. Harney Food Systems hopes to make these dinners an annual or twice-yearly event that showcases food grown in Harney County.

### Get Involved

Frank would like to encourage folks to get involved with Harney Food Systems. “We’re new and we’re trying to get the word out about what we do,” she said. If someone wants to start a food business or learn how to grow flowers or start beekeeping, Harney Food Systems can assist. “We want to help promote agriculture through local healthy food and make it available to people in Harney County,” Frank said. “If it is something someone is even just a little bit interested in, I would encourage them to come to the meetings or to reach out and see if it fits for them.” Harney Food Systems meets regularly at the Foundry building in downtown Burns. For more information about meetings or the group in general, email Kellie Frank at [kellie@highdesertpartnership.org](mailto:kellie@highdesertpartnership.org) or stop by and see her at the Foundry building.

*This article is provided by High Desert Partnership; a Harney County nonprofit convening and supporting six collaboratives including the Biz Harney Opportunity Collaborative.*

