

Food Co-ops



THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 300 retail food cooperatives in the United States. They have nearly 400,000 members and total gross sales in excess of \$700 million. Democratically run food co-ops pioneered the natural and organic food market in the 1970s and they remain in the forefront of that movement. Involvement in their communities is also a key part of most food co-ops' missions. Their efforts range from charity drives to recycling programs to anti-hunger campaigns. Following is a sampling of what food co-ops do in their communities.

Caring for the Community

Co-opportunity Consumers Cooperative, Santa Monica, California. Every Tuesday, the co-op donates food to nearby St. Joseph Early Learning Center, which provides childcare for pre-school kids of low-income and homeless families. Members and employees also donate toys to St. Joseph's during the holidays.

Food Front Cooperative Grocery, Portland, Oregon. With its annual Sustainable Community Awards, Food Front co-op recognizes organizations that have helped the community through sustainability. The awards reflect a commitment to healthy neighborhoods and agricultural systems.

Community Investment Funds

Many food co-ops have community or social investment funds that funnel donations from members to non-profits in the community. Among them:

Ashland Food Cooperative in Ashland, Ore., which generated nearly \$25,000 this past year for 25 non-profit organizations. Grantees included the Oregon Children's Foundation, the Ashland Emergency Food Bank, and Ashland High School, for a scholarship for a graduating senior pursuing culinary studies.

Williamson Street Grocery Cooperative in Madison, Wis., which gave \$7,000 to seven groups, including a coalition for the disabled and a day care center that connected kids to sustainable agriculture. Williamson Street co-op also provides food and fundraising incentives to more than 45 other groups.

BriarPatch Community Co-op in Grass Valley, Calif., which in four years has given \$3,000 to 20 groups including a food bank and a childcare co-op.

Sacramento Natural Foods Cooperative, which collects contributions at cash registers and distributes them each month to four charities. The co-op also contributes food for special events and gift baskets and sells salsa and pasta sauce that is grown, prepared and marketed by students from a local high school.

Ukiah Natural Foods Co-op, in Ukiah, Calif., which this year provided eight grants totaling \$15,000 to food and housing groups.

Wheatsville Co-op, Austin, Texas. The board, management and members pick 10 organizations annually to be the co-op's community action groups for one month each. On Wednesdays during their month, the groups receive one percent of co-op sales. In the past year, an average of more than \$600 per group was donated. In November and December, the co-op collects canned foods for a food bank and clothing for a Coats for Kids program.

Moscow Food Co-op, Moscow, Idaho. The co-op gives grants to non-profits by donating two percent of all Tuesday sales to them for a month. The board selects the recipients, which receive an average donation of \$700. The co-op also holds an Empty Bowls fundraiser in which ceramic bowls filled with soup are sold to raise money to fight hunger. In addition, it takes vanloads of shoppers on organic farm tours and hosts an annual Taste Fair featuring local farmers.

Silver City Food Co-op, Silver City, New Mexico. Penny Park is a vibrant community park in Silver City, built with penny donations and maintained with community support. Silver City Food Co-op offers week-long discounts to those who help with repairs. The co-op also has participated in a variety of park events, including a children's festival, where it ran a concession stand benefiting the park.

Caring for the Environment

Food Conspiracy Co-op, Tucson, Arizona. The co-op was an early supporter of recycling. Recognizing that one business would have a limited impact, it formed Downtown Don't Waste It, which now has about 100 participating businesses. The program was cited as the state's Best Recycling Program.

Sevananda Food Cooperative, Atlanta, Georgia. The co-op is a big supporter of green power. For \$5 each month, members of the community can purchase 10-kilowatt shares of power generated from the store's solar panels. The program was launched with help from the local Sierra Club chapter and the Georgia Center for Law in the Public Interest.

Community Food Co-op, Bellingham, Washington. Community Food Co-op participated in an unusual effort that fights hunger while it boosts organic farming. Four new farms were paired with well-established mentor farmers, and together they contracted with the co-op to provide 17 weeks of organic

produce to a food bank. With donations from members, the co-op purchased the produce, which was delivered directly to the food bank.

People’s Food Co-op, Ann Arbor, Michigan. Recycling is important to People’s Food Co-op. It has an award-winning program that generates three mountains of recycled materials each week. It is also a charter member of a county program that encourages business to adopt sustainable practices. The co-op also offers free classes on nutrition to anyone in the community and last year partnered with the schools to co-host cooking classes for adults. Finally, the co-op makes donations of groceries, prepared food, gift certificates and gift baskets to local non-profits.

Committed to Children

Many food co-ops are active in nearby schools. Among them:

Ukiah Natural Foods Co-op, Ukiah, Calif., which adopted a third grade class for the coming school year. The co-op will educate the class about natural foods during monthly visits and also sponsor field trips to local farms. The co-op is also initiating a scholarship for a local student of sustainable agriculture.

First Alternative Co-op, Corvallis, Ore., which has a Chefs in the Classroom program that allows children to learn about healthy eating and sustainable agriculture while they explore differences in food choices across cultures. The effort highlights different flat breads from around the world. Kids try their hands at dicing, slicing, cleaning, serving, and cooking organic foods. The co-op does about 80 presentations a year.

Ocean Beach People’s Organic Food Co-op, San Diego, Calif., which began offering organic farm field trips to fifth graders at Dana Middle School in 1999. To date, more than 2,250 children have participated. Field trips include hands-on work in the fields. For most children, they are their first experience with food outside of a supermarket.

Brattleboro Food Cooperative, Brattleboro, Vermont, which offers free food and farming lessons to school-aged children. Co-op staff visits classrooms and offers lessons on nutrition and sustainable agriculture. Free tasting is included. The co-op also sponsors a health fair in a senior center where alternative health care providers set up information tables. Samples of nutritious food are provided.

Weaver’s Way Cooperative, Philadelphia, which sponsors Marketplace, an education program teaching middle school students about business and nutrition. The students buy products from the co-op at wholesale and sell them at their school, located across the street. They learn about healthy products, cooperative principals, and how to manage a business. Each year, the students donate their Marketplace earnings to causes in the community and around the world.