Harvest time is here, and 64-year-old Sue Anderson's been burning the midnight oil. A garden outside her home in the Wilmington Housing Authority's Hillcrest community recently yielded several armfuls of leafy greens, resulting in a lengthy preservation task.

"I come from a meat and potatoes family," Anderson said. "I never imagined myself staying up into the middle of the night making kale chips. And they're delicious."

Anderson is one of several Hillcrest residents taking an adult nutrition class offered through food systems program Feast Down East, and she credits the course with adding a diverse roster of vegetables to her dinner table. The class is just one of several initiatives launched by the organization to combat hunger in parts of the region designated as food deserts.

Defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture as both low-income and low-access, food deserts have a poverty rate of 20 percent or more with at least 500 people in the zone living 1 mile from a grocery store for urban districts or 10 miles in rural communities. Seven food deserts are designated in Wilmington alone, and hunger remains a significant issue across the state.


Leslie Hossfeld and Jill Waity with the University North Carolina Wilmington's Department of Sociology and Criminology have studied poverty and food insecurity extensively. Hossfeld notes that according to 2013 numbers, North Carolina's poverty rate of 17.9 percent was well ahead of the nation's 14.5 percent average. While only 14.3 percent of Americans at that time experienced food insecurity, the rate rose to 17.3 percent in the state, the fifth-highest level nationwide.

The USDA identifies one food desert in Brunswick County stretching west from the Cape Fear River through Navassa and Leland, and none in Pender County. While Bladen, Columbus and Robeson counties are consistently Southeastern North Carolina's most impoverished, hunger in the comparatively wealthy Wilmington remains a stubborn problem.

The Port City's food deserts include a population of more than 16,000, with 81 percent having limited access to food and 41 percent in low-income households, Hossfeld reports. Defined within the boundaries of multi-block U.S. Census tracts, Wilmington's food deserts are mostly concentrated along the Market Street and Carolina Beach Road corridors, but also include a large pocket around UNCW and a stretch between Greenfield and Marstellar streets where Hillcrest is located.
The boundaries do shift as new stores open and gentrification changes the economic makeup of certain communities. One of the city’s eight food deserts disappeared completely with the opening of Carolina Farmin’ in 2011, but the most recent data don’t include the grocer's closing in 2013.

"These pockets of persistent poverty, even in the interior of New Hanover County, are pretty embedded," Hossfeld said. "There's still a long road to go, because you've got to change the culture as well."

Anderson and her classmates are part of that cultural shift. Fellow Hillcrest resident Ann Tann, 68, also attended the eight-week program dubbed "Eat Healthy. Eat Local. Eat Well."

Among the curricula, students learned to read nutrition labels, fix balanced meals and use affordable, locally grown produce in their home kitchens. The final lesson included a free kitchen scale, cookbook and final cooking tutorial from noted chef Keith Rhodes of Catch restaurant.

"In the time I've been going to this class, I've already improved my blood sugar," the diabetic Tann said while enjoying a kale salad and herbed chicken breast prepared by Rhodes. "I just wish it lasted a little longer."

Many of the ingredients used in the class are available at a pair of farmers market-style stalls that make weekly appearances in Hillcrest and Rankin Terrace, another Wilmington Housing Authority community along Red Cross Street. AmeriCorps VISTA service member Justin Brantley can be found regularly working both booths every Friday.

In addition to the market stalls, Brantley has established a build-a-box produce delivery service to Solomon Towers at 15 Castle St. and Glover Plaza along the east side of Greenfield Lake, and hopes to bring a truncated version of the adult nutrition class to those facilities for elderly and disabled residents later this summer.

Tirelessly committed to improving food security in some of the city's toughest neighborhoods, one of Brantley's latest efforts was to dig out and revive a dormant community garden at Hillcrest. "This isn't going to feed the entire neighborhood, but it does offer an opportunity to learn about growing your own food and there's a lot of room for gardens here" in Hillcrest, Brantley said. "People out here care about this community and they want to see improvements."

For Anderson, a former special education advocate now on disability, that sentiment couldn't be truer. She volunteers at the Hillcrest produce stand, and lends her green thumb in the communal garden as well, zipping from both on an electric mobility scooter. "I've always given away my talents. I feel good being involved and helping," Anderson said. "I'd love to see more of my neighbors get involved. It makes a difference in your food budget; I've had salads every day this week."

Good food is never cheap, but Feast Down East director Jane Steigerwald said customers often are surprised to find fresh fruits and vegetables available at wholesale prices. Established in 2006 to connect limited resource rural farmers with a viable marketplace, Feast Down East buys directly from growers and works actively to bring those goods where they're needed.
Sales have grown steadily. The Rankin Terrace market began in 2012 (Hillcrest kicked off in December 2014), sourcing from six farmers. That’s now up to 17, with volume increasing from 100 to 250 pounds between the two markets over the same time.

The recent addition of a machine to accept EBT SNAP payments – commonly known as food stamps – has helped, but there’s still work to do. "Some people take a little convincing to use the products they’re not used to; they weren’t really wild about kale," Steigerwald said. "Education is really the missing link we need to connect people with healthier foods."

Steigerwald said she’d love to see more traffic at the stands from the neighborhoods surrounding Rankin Terrace and Hillcrest, particularly from EBT customers. EBT machines are typically pricey and require monthly payments to maintain, but Feast Down East secured theirs at no cost through a program aimed at food providers working to alleviate poverty and hunger. Extra EBT traffic would earn them a second machine, consequently enabling more markets to open in other food deserts.

Steigerwald said Feast’s mission fills some of the area’s hungriest bellies, and she is optimistic about reaching more in the future. But she doesn’t paint a completely rosy picture, noting there are still unserved food deserts overlapping the neighborhoods of Sunset Park, Longleaf Park, and a large swath between 23rd Street and North College Road along the north side of Market Street.

While work remains, she takes solace in the benefits that are reaching individuals like Anderson and Tann through the organization’s access and education efforts. "You can see it, people just responded to it in such a positive way," Steigerwald said. "Even if you can change one person's behavior, it's a success."

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Facts

KNOW YOUR TERMS

Food desert: As defined by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and U.S. Department of the Treasury, a food desert is a "census tract with a substantial share of residents who live in low-income areas that have low levels of access to a grocery store or healthy, affordable food retail outlet."

To qualify as a food desert, those tracts must meet two measurable criteria as spelled out by the USDA:
1. They qualify as "low-income communities," based on having: a) a poverty rate of 20 percent or greater, or b) a median family income at or below 80 percent of the area median family income; AND
2. They qualify as "low-access communities," based on the determination that at least 500 persons and/or at least 33 percent of the census tract's population live more than 1 mile from a supermarket or large grocery store (10 miles, in the case of non-metropolitan census tracts).

Food security: The USDA ranks food security in four categories including high, marginal, low and very low based on responses to the following questions:
1. (I/We) worried whether (my/our) food would run out before (I/we) got money to buy more.
2. In the past 12 months, did (you/you or other adults in your household) ever cut the size of your meals or skip meals because there wasn't enough money for food?
3. In the past 12 months, did (you/you or other adults in your household) ever not eat for a whole day because there wasn't enough money for food?

– U.S. Department of Agriculture