

## USDA program brings local produce to local schools

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On the mainland, big farms can find ways to sell their produce to small school districts, but with the situation reversed in Hawaii, local farmers sometimes find it difficult to get their products to the state's large public district, says Nancy Redfeather, program director of Hawaii Island School Garden Network.

That's where the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Fresh Fruit and Vegetable Program comes in. The program provides funding to eligible schools — those serving students in kindergarten to sixth grade with at least half of the student population qualifying for free or reduced lunch — to purchase locally grown produce for morning and afternoon snacks.

"It's a way for our local farmers to enter the school program at a very practical level," Redfeather said. Glenna Owens, director of the School Food Services Branch of the Hawaii Department of Education, will meet with Hawaii Island farmers next week to discuss the program, including some of the basic tasks to accomplish to participate as a farmer or produce distributor.

The meetings are 4 to 5 p.m. Tuesday at the CTAHR Komohana Station, 875 Komohana St. in Hilo, which is limited to 20 people; 12:30 to 1:30 p.m. May 14 at Mealani Experiment Station, 64-289 Mamalahoa Highway, Waimea; and 4 to 5 p.m. May 14 at the CTAHR Kainaliu Station, 79-7381 Mamalahoa Highway in Kainaliu, across from the Aloha Theater. The Kainaliu location is not accessible for individuals with disabilities.

Redfeather said one program advantage is that it works for very small producers. She recently attended an event at a local elementary school and brought along several bags of jaboticaba from the six trees on her property. That small amount of fresh fruit she had available was enough to allow roughly 200 students to get a taste of the unusual fruit, she said, prompting her to consider contacting a wholesaler in the future to get more of the jaboticaba to other schools. Students were receptive to her offers to take a bite, she added.



An assortment of fresh fruits and vegetables grown on Hawaii Island is displayed. Special to West Hawaii Today/The Kohala Center.

"I always hear that kids won't taste things that are new," Redfeather said. "I didn't see that at all."

Only two children declined the fruit, and one explained that he had many allergies and couldn't try something new without his mother's permission, Redfeather added.

Owens has expressed a desire for producers of unusual fruits, particularly fruits that aren't apples, oranges or bananas, to participate, Redfeather said.

"She's really interested in the kids tasting things they won't taste at home," Redfeather said. Hawaii Island farmers also grow, in noncommercial amounts, fragile fruits that can't easily be transported off island or sold in large amounts. Those amounts might be perfect for schools in the USDA program.

Farmers interested in participating must sell their products to a participating distributor, who then may sell the produce to public schools. Qualifying public charter schools are allowed to purchase directly from farmers, Redfeather said.

About 80 Hawaii schools, 32 of which are on the Big Island, already participate in the USDA program.

Registration is free but space is limited. RSVP by May 12 online at [ffvp.eventbrite.com](http://ffvp.eventbrite.com) or call The Kohala Center at 887-6411.

The meetings are sponsored by the Hawaii Island School Garden Network and the Laulima Center for Rural and Cooperative Business Development, both of which are programs of The Kohala Center.

- See more at:

<http://westhawaii.com/news/local-news/usda-program-brings-local-produce-local-schools#sthash.WWWBzKTH.dpuf>