Horticulture + Nutrition

Why growing fruits and vegetables matters

Eating fruits and vegetables is part of a healthy diet. Fruits and vegetables are not only sources of many vitamins and minerals, but eating them reduces the risk of disease. In fact, the World Health Organization has identified low fruit and vegetable intake as a top risk factor for global mortality.

Specific fruits or vegetables can be used to target particular nutrient deficiencies—for example, orange-fleshed sweet potatoes have been proven effective for alleviating Vitamin A deficiencies. Perhaps more importantly, these whole foods also provide an array of phytonutrients and antioxidants that have a variety of beneficial health impacts. A diet rich in fruits and vegetables provides necessary micronutrients that cannot be found in staple grains, meat or dairy.

Dietary diversity—how many food groups a person routinely eats—can be used as a proxy for the nutritional adequacy of a diet. Eating a variety of fruits and vegetables is key to achieving dietary diversity and meeting daily micronutrient needs.

How horticultural crops can improve nutrition:

- **Farmers** who grow fruits and vegetables often eat some of what they are growing—and they may also have more money to buy food. Because fruits and vegetables are high-value crops, farmers who grow them can earn significant income—even from small plots—and consistently higher prices than those growing cereal crops. That additional income can allow farmers to spend more on food purchases.
- **Women** make up a majority of horticultural farmers in many countries. Because they are often responsible for feeding their households and making nutrition choices, reducing women's workload—including time and energy spent growing and selling crops—can increase their capacity to provide for their households' nutrition needs. Women are also more likely to spend their available income on improving their families' health.
- **Regions and communities** where farmers grow and sell horticultural crops have greater access to fruits and vegetables for purchase. As more fruits and vegetables enter the market, prices may decrease—which can make these nutritious crops more available and more enticing to shoppers.

Double burden of malnutrition:

As diets shift in developing countries, malnutrition can include both people who are undernourished and people who are overweight. Undernutrition and overnutrition can co-exist, even in the same household. Increasing fruit and vegetable consumption is one of the few dietary strategies that can help improve both situations.

The Horticulture Innovation Lab conducts research to improve fruit and vegetable production and marketing for smallholder farmers—with solutions that can reduce women's labor, reduce waste between the farm and the market, and increase the availability of highly nutritious fruits and vegetables at markets. This work aims to improve not only the diversity of crops grown on a farm or in a region, but also to increase the dietary diversity of farmers and their communities.

USAID FROM THE AMERICAN PEOPLE | HORTICULTURE INNOVATION LAB | UCDAVIS UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

This fact sheet is made possible by the generous support of the American people through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The contents are the responsibility of the Horticulture Innovation Lab and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the U.S. Government. Updated 07/14.