

BY DAYLE HAYES, MS, RD

Making the Most of

Harvest of the Month

Easy, effective strategies to connect cafeterias, classrooms and communities.

When I was offered the opportunity to write about school nutrition best practices in Harvest of the Month (HOTM) programs across the U.S., I jumped at the chance. After nearly two decades of working in child nutrition and nutrition education, I am convinced that Harvest of the Month is one of the easiest and most effective ways to teach children (and adults) about nutrition—and to promote school meal participation at the same time.


While ideal for school settings, many HOTM programs reach out to engage support from other partners in both retail and commercial foodservice segments. This is another benefit for school nutrition operations, because your participation in HOTM is being reinforced by what families are seeing promoted in supermarkets and restaurants. Also, most statewide HOTM programs tend to focus on in-state agricultural products, which means growers, processors, distributors and others in the local and regional ag industry are primed to collaborate with you, making it even easier to find resources and launch creative campaigns together.

HOTM programs have grown steadily since the early 2000s, and many have found new ways to flourish, even during COVID-19 school closures. Whether you are in a school district that follows a state-wide program or you want to develop your own approach to HOTM, the great news is that there are dozens of resources as close as your computer screen.

TOP FIVE REASONS TO LOVE *Harvest of the Month*

Let's start whetting your appetite for this terrific nutrition education opportunity by identifying its benefits.

1 HOTM nutrition education can connect school kitchens and cafeterias to classrooms with simple lessons and engaging activities in a variety of subjects (including math, science, geography, health, etc.).



2 HOTM can provide a basic framework for promoting local foods that are featured in school meals. It is a relatively “easy” step into the farm-to-school world.

3 HOTM gives you a platform to introduce new recipes and refresh your usual menu cycle. Sending family-size recipes home to parents can help reinforce the love of tasty new menu items.

4 HOTM can help build a nation of fruit and veggie lovers. As revealed in Produce for Better Health Foundation’s *State of the Plate* report (www.tinyurl.com/stateoftheplate-SNmag), U.S. consumption of produce continues to decline among all age groups. This is a troubling trend, and school nutrition programs are well-suited to help turn it around!


5 HOTM is F-U-N! Even picky eaters are often willing to try a new food in a sample size. Being offered a chance to express an opinion is the proverbial cherry on top! Students respond well to taking a very small bite and then casting their vote for (or against) a new menu item. (Continued on page 51)


OG Harvest of the Month CAMPAIGNS


One of the oldest—and arguably most extensive—Harvest of the Month initiatives is found in **CALIFORNIA** (www.tinyurl.com/CAHOTM-SNmag).


According to its HOTM website, the program’s roots are found in a grassroots campaign developed by a collaborative of local school districts as part of a broader nutrition education effort targeted to low-income students. Recognizing the value of this approach, the California Department of Public Health launched a statewide effort in 2005. Today it is standardized, cost-effective, replicable and available to all. Materials are periodically updated to reflect current dietary guidance and research.

Whether or not your state has its own HOTM program, the California Department of Public Health site is an excellent resource and a great place for novices to start. It features the essential elements of a HOTM program at no cost:

 Materials for 36 different California-grown fruits and vegetables, from asparagus to zucchini and most everything in between. While it covers all the basic produce items plus dry beans, it does not feature any of the proteins (beef, fish and eggs) or grains seen in newer HOTM programs, or region-specific items like cranberries.

 There are four elements for each HOTM item: Educator Newsletters, Family Newsletters, Community Newsletters and Menu Slicks. These are grouped into Fall, Winter, Spring and Summer and are not tied to a specific month. These downloadable materials have space available to customize with your district or school logo.

 There is also a Training Center for those who are new to HOTM, along with an Educators Corner, featuring additional resources like adventurous science activities for the classroom and evaluation tools to help measure the success of HOTM programs and components.

 While you can download and use these HOTM materials as is, if you would like to reprint, adapt or rebrand them, **permission is required**. Contact Katharina Streng to discuss specifics or get more information about options at katharina.streng@cdph.ca.gov.



OG Harvest of the Month CAMPAIGNS

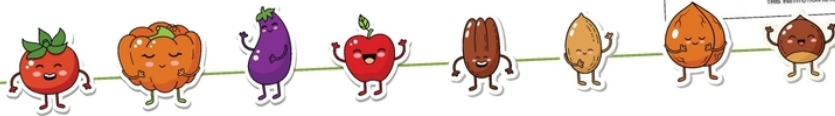
Another one of the oldest—and arguably most extensive—Harvest of the Month initiatives is found in **GEORGIA** (www.tinyurl.com/GAOTM-SNmag).

The good news is that even if you do not live in Georgia, you can still take advantage of the first-class HOTM resources from the Georgia Department of Education's School Nutrition Program. While they are branded with #FuelingGA, #GeorgiaGrown and #GASNP social tags in most cases, they can be downloaded by anyone without a password and can serve as inspiration and models for your own program.

You can also access and share all 20 of the wonderful Harvest with Holly videos and recipes (www.tinyurl.com/HarvestHollyvideos-SNmag). Farm to School Specialist Holly Thaw, MS, RDN, LD, started these episodes when COVID-19 closed Georgia schools. Each video showcases how HOTM items are used in Georgia schools and shares ideas and simple recipes for enjoying them at home.

JULY	AUGUST	SEPTEMBER
<p>Peaches</p>	<p>Watermelon</p>	<p>Apples</p>
<p>CELEBRATE PUMPKIN</p>	<p>CELEBRATE SWEET POTATOES</p>	<p>CELEBRATE LEMONS</p>
<p>CELEBRATE CAULIFLOWER</p>	<p>CELEBRATE CABBAGE</p>	<p>CELEBRATE LENTILS</p>
<p>CELEBRATE BEANS</p>	<p>CELEBRATE CAULIFLOWER</p>	<p>CELEBRATE LENTILS</p>
<p>CELEBRATE STRAWBERRIES</p>	<p>CELEBRATE BLUEBERRIES</p>	<p>CELEBRATE TOMATOES</p>

Georgia Harvest of the Month campaign highlights items sourced locally and offers the opportunity to reduce dietary intake, reduce food waste and improve food quality. This resolution is an equal opportunity program.



finally, dairy-free done right



Kids love the creamy taste of Ripple. You'll appreciate the extra nutrition, convenience and safety.

- Free of the Top 8 Allergens
- 8g plant-based protein
- Shelf-stable, single-serve, sustainable packaging format
- USDA-compliant fluid-milk substitute for K-12

Request a **FREE SAMPLE**
ripplefoodservice.com/school

FUNDAMENTALS FOR HARVEST OF THE MONTH SUCCESS

The basic components of an HOTM campaign are relatively simple. Materials should be designed to focus attention and education on one food at a time. While the earliest HOTM programs were all about fruits and vegetables (in season and local), newer iterations now include grains, legumes, meats, seafood and dairy, as well as herbs and spices.

In school settings, HOTM elements typically include some combination of:

- highlighted menu items with serving line signage and cafeteria posters;
- taste-test/sampling activities in the cafeteria;
- classroom lessons and book readings; and
- information shared with families and community members.

These elements are most effective when they are used together, but they can be used separately by a variety of school community stakeholders as part of a comprehensive nutrition education program or curriculum.

Most state-wide or other well-established HOTM programs produce materials in both English and Spanish, and sometimes in other languages—Michigan HOTM resources, for example, are also available in Arabic! As HOTM has become increasingly popular in Head Start and before/after-school care programs, many groups now provide targeted preschool materials, as well.

LAUNCH OR EXPAND YOUR OWN HOTM CAMPAIGN

Will SY2021-22 be the year you begin promoting HOTM foods in *your* cafeteria? Or perhaps you have been doing so for years, but are ready to step things up with new activities, collaborative partnerships or innovative approaches? With input from operators from Maine to Alaska and Hawaii, I've gathered some best practice advice and tips. Some of these will require district-level coordination but some can be organized by an individual cafeteria manager.

Search for existing programs.

The main advantage of existing state programs is that you do not have to put a program together with pieces from different puzzles. While there is no national listing of HOTM programs, a simple search through your web browser will uncover many (and you'll

find a state-by-state list that I've compiled as part of SN's digital extras on www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazinebonus). Start by searching "[STATE NAME] harvest of the month."

HOTM resources may be available from different state government agencies, including departments of



Earn money for your foodservice department with IPS Rebates

As the leading K-12 rebate processor, IPS provides members with a time-saving, efficient process to acquire additional revenue for their foodservice department. No more coupon clipping, providing proof of purchase, or negotiating with individual manufacturers! Our rebates program fits seamlessly within your day-to-day operations at no cost.

Interested? Sign up today for your free membership and start receiving rebates on your food purchases. It really is that easy!

IPS serves over 30% of the K-12 enrollment in the U.S.

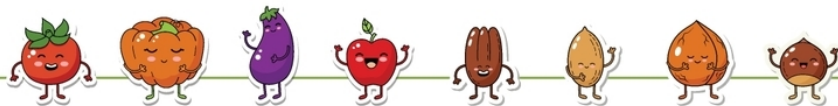
We distribute rebate checks to 3,000+ members quarterly

IPS partners with 380+ leading brands and manufacturers and growing



Visit www.ipsrebates.com to Enroll Today!

Contact Us | P: (800) 426-9883 | E: ips@ipsrebates.com



Harvest of the Month DURING COVID-19

Harvest of the Month programs across the U.S. adapted their activities to the realities of COVID-19 school closures and remote/hybrid learning models. Here, four HOTM program coordinators reflect on their pandemic-era activities.

Janelle Manzano is the Farm to School Program Specialist in the **San Diego Unified School District**. The district's HOTM program started in 2010 and has strong support from the district's wellness committee, as well as from local non-profits and community foundations. To pivot from classroom-based taste tests and nutrition ed activities last spring, Manzano

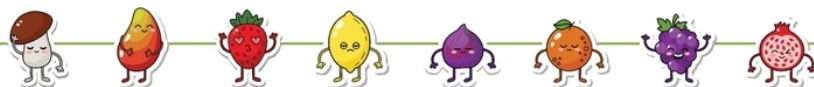
- went virtual via Facebook Live (videos are archived on www.facebook.com/SDFarmtoSchool/);
- worked with school nutrition teams packing weekly 21-meal bags to add HOTM items like grapes, plums and apricots; and
- worked with a dietetic intern and a FoodCorps service member to shift nutrition education lessons to include conversations about food and the immune system, as well as mindful eating.

Emily Armstrong is Education Director for **Island Grown Initiative** (www.igimv.org), a community non-profit on **Martha's Vineyard**, off the **Massachusetts** coast. Its HOTM program (www.islandgrownschools.org/harvest-of-the-month) began in 2007 and has been going strong ever since, using its involvement with schools to springboard into the rest of the community with materials now showing up at farmers markets, farm stands and grocery stores. Throughout COVID-19, Armstrong has focused on "Island Grown at Home" ideas, partnered with the local library on creating food and literacy kits and even Zoomed from a chicken coop! Her goal has been to keep the program fresh with new recipes and new connections, such as with an area food pantry. Some materials are translated into Portuguese (about a quarter of the

island residents are Brazilian) and the group is currently developing promotions for indigenous foods, like cranberries, in collaboration with the Wampanoag Tribe of Gay Head (Aquinnah).

Dena Stearns is the Communications Director for the **Massachusetts Farm to School Program** (www.massfarmtoschool.org) where HOTM (www.tinyurl.com/MAF2SHOTM-SNmag) has been a signature program since 2013. During COVID-19, Stearns and her team stepped up digital activities and created recipes and activities for families at home. They also added more grab-and-go items to their extensive recipe collection for school meals programs (www.tinyurl.com/MAHOTMrecipes-SNmag), which is open to everyone.

As a proud Montana resident, I would be remiss if I left out **Montana Farm to School's** excellent HOTM program and its coordinator **Aubree Roth**. Like other state-wide programs, Montana features a growing list of foods beyond produce (such as beef, grains, lentils and chickpeas) and is working with native experts on adding items with a regional heritage, like choke cherries and buffalo. In the wake of school closures, Roth worked with schools to promote an array of HOTM implementation ideas, coordinate home taste-tests and ensure that grab-n-go meals incorporated HOTM items. While many materials require registration, its Harvest of the Month 101 resource (www.tinyurl.com/MTHOTM-SNmag) is available to anyone seeking ideas for getting started.



agriculture (Florida, Texas and Washington), education (Georgia, Iowa and Oregon), public health (California) and social services (Missouri). Some are organized through state university programs (Louisiana, Montana and North Carolina), as well as farm-to-school advocacy groups (Massachusetts, New Hampshire and Vermont).

You likely will discover that some states' materials have not been kept up-to-date. But this doesn't mean the information itself has expired! For example, although the most recent Alaska Farm to School materials are dated 2018, its cultivated and indigenous monthly calendars

(www.farmtoschoolalaska.org/harvestofthemonth) are both beautiful and useful. Also be advised that some states will ask you to register for password-protected materials. Most are willing to share materials with non-state residents; they just want to track and evaluate the use of these resources.

Identify some promising partners. HOTM efforts are most successful when the target audience receives the same message from multiple sources. Consider the partners you might find both inside your school/district and out in the community.

Great in-school partners include teachers, especially ag and science instructors, who are often looking for “real-world” activities to pair with lessons. Parents who are passionate about farm-to-school initiatives or community gardening can also be excellent volunteer partners to both promote HOTM and participate in activities.

Community partners are many, varied and probably limited only by your ability to think outside the box. Some obvious possibilities include extension agencies and master gardener programs. These organizations are passionate about teaching about how plants grow! Or turn to farmers, ranchers and fisherfolk who can showcase how they do their jobs. Chefs and culinary experts can provide inspiration and demonstrate recipes.

Identify funding sources as needed. You may need extra funds to support your big HOTM ideas. Some organizations may have designated HOTM grants or funds to support farm-to-school and other agriculture-based initiatives. For example, several years ago Loudoun County (Va.) Public Schools launched its pioneering farmer trading cards campaign with support from the region’s economic development agency.

Start by reaching out to the state agency that administers child nutrition programs—if they don’t have grants, they may

be able to direct you to those who might. Identify local community foundations, especially those interested in education, agriculture and wellness. These may be local philanthropists or the charitable arms of supermarket chains, hospitals and food marketing boards.

Start slow and small. Just because the program is called Harvest of the *Month* doesn’t oblige you to coordinate a fresh promotion every month. If this is a new initiative for your school nutrition operation, you can start with one showcase per season: fall, winter, spring and summer. You can also limit the number of activities you implement in the beginning. For example, you might start with a new menu item and a taste-test, promoted with posters. Activities can be developed for in-person and virtual outreach; see the box on page 52 about some COVID-19 adaptations.

Use your school gardens. Using school garden produce is the perfect way to help children understand where their food comes from. The adage that “if they grow it, they will eat it” often turns out to be true. The amount of produce from a school garden is often perfect for a small-scale taste-test. You can then purchase quantities of the same item from a local producer to serve in the cafeteria or send home in meal packs.

Trust the process. “I am always impressed by what

Designed for schools to enhance ease of Merchandising for K-12

Back to School Nutrition is Within Your Reach

- Accommodates milk crates for convenient serving.
- Versatile configuration & shelving for grab-n-go purchases.
- Interruption free stocking from the rear.
- Overnight locking security features.

FEDERAL
The Signature of Quality

NEW
RSSM378-MLK

LMDM-4878

800-356-4206 | federalind.com/schools

“Sometimes we forget to tell the story of the great things we are doing in school nutrition. Any restaurant that has a special monthly promotion would definitely advertise it, so do not keep yours a secret. Utilize the promotion resources developed by [the HOTM sponsor or agency]. Make sure that you get HOTM information to those who might not eat in the cafeteria through school newsletters, websites and other communication channels.”

—Holly Thaw, MS, RDN, LD, Farm to School Specialist, Georgia Department of Education



children will enjoy eating for Harvest of the Month,” says Aubree Roth, Coordinator, Montana Farm to School Program. “An adult partner will call and say they really don’t like ‘X’ food—frequently beets—and would rather not serve it. We encourage them to try it any way, and inevitably we get a later call or email about how much the students liked the recipe they were served.”

Toot your HOTM horn. Make sure that school community stakeholders know about all of HOTM activities you are doing to engage students. This means everyone from the superintendent and school board to teachers and school nurses. You can even invite them to taste-tests and other interactive lessons.

READY TO HARVEST THE BENEFITS OF HOTM?

I hope that you have admired the examples of HOTM materials shared throughout this article and investigated at least a couple of the links to the vast online resources that are available for your use. If your district already does some HOTM, I suspect that you have one or two *new* ideas to increase engagement, such as a Facebook Live or Zoom during your next cafeteria-based HOTM event! If you are brand-new to HOTM, there is no better time to begin implementing just a few of the elements mentioned here:

- Download the *Montana Harvest of the Month Summer Food Services 101 Guide* (www.tinyurl.com/MontanaHOTMSummer-SNmag) and make plans to highlight a few HOTM items on your summer meals menus.
- Watch Harvest with Holly’s refreshing Watermelon video (www.tinyurl.com/WatermelonVideo-SNmag) and check out the watermelon fun in the August file from Georgia’s state agency (www.tinyurl.com/GAWatermelonFun-SNmag).

- Share a copy of the family or community version of the California Harvest of the Month Pepper newsletter (www.tinyurl.com/CAPepperNwstr-SNmag) on your Facebook page or website.

Remember, there’s no need to feel overwhelmed by adding another thing to your busy to-do list. The beauty of using HOTM as the foundation for your nutrition education efforts is that there’s no need to reinvent any wheels.

Resources are as abundant as the foods to showcase! **SN**

Dayle Hayes is a well-known school nutrition cheerleader based in Bozeman, Mont., and founder of the School Meals That Rock social media brand.

BONUS WEB CONTENT

Making the Most of Harvest of the Month
Ready to get started? This month’s digital extras include links to every HOTM state program. Remember, you don’t have to live in the state to borrow ideas!

Visit www.schoolnutrition.org/snmagazinebonus to access.