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Howard County Students Grow Fresh Produce in Schools Via Hydroponic Gardening Systems

Columbia, MD – The Howard County Food Council (HCFC) has installed Gardyn Hydroponic Systems at seven County schools to grow fresh vegetables, herbs, and flowers through hands-on instruction with students. The food grown during the 2025-2026 school year was shared with students for tasting and experimenting opportunities as they learned more about the produce they had worked to cultivate. The HCFC is a partnership between the Howard County Health Department and University of Maryland Extension-Howard County (UME-HC). Photos of the hydroponic systems can be found in this [Flickr photo album](#).

“Growing your own food is a great way to engage students and provide real-life examples of how agriculture impacts our everyday health,” said **Dr. Maura Rossman, Howard County Health Officer**. “A hands-on gardening experience will help develop these skills for a lifetime. The Howard County Food Council is fulfilling a valuable role in training the next generation on healthy cooking and nutrition principles.”

“Gardyn Hydroponic Systems do more than just grow fresh produce. These systems cultivate curiosity, teach students about nutrition, science, sustainability, and emphasize the importance of healthy eating through hands-on learning,” said **Howard County Executive Calvin Ball**. “I want to thank the Howard County Food Council, the Howard County Health Department, and the University of Maryland Extension – Howard County for their leadership and commitment to fostering healthy communities. By connecting classroom lessons with real-world experiences, we're helping prepare our county's next generation to make informed choices about their health, their environment, and their future.”

Providing this initiative in community schools was a priority for the first phase of the project. For the 2026-2027 school year, this program will expand to include four high schools and will be incorporated into their Life Skills Programs with UME-HC 4-H Youth Development. Additional learning opportunities will also be provided by UME-HC educators for all participating schools.

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Page two

July 9, 2026

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"Hands-on learning opportunities that have real life application is often the type of learning that stays with a student for a lifetime," said **William J. Barnes, Superintendent of Schools**. "I appreciate this opportunity led by Dr. Rossman and our partners at the Howard County Health Department to fuse a high-level learning experience with an outcome that benefits our communities."

Hydroponics is a way of growing plants in water instead of dirt. Because the water contains the vitamins and nutrients the plants need, their roots can absorb them directly. This helps them grow faster, uses 90% less water, and allows fresh food to grow indoors all year long.

"Hydroponics gives students the unique opportunity to learn by growing their own food," said **Nathan Glenn, who assists in overseeing the HCFC with UME-HC**. "These systems turn classrooms into hands-on learning environments where students can explore science, technology, and agriculture while developing a deeper understanding of our food system. It's exciting to see students engage with concepts that come to life right in front of them."

Teacher feedback from the first year of this project emphasized students' excitement and curiosity, as well as their increased exposure to a variety of vegetables they otherwise would not have had the opportunity to learn about and taste. The connection to classroom curriculum, therapeutic benefits, and student leadership opportunities were additional advantages observed. These hydroponic systems complement the community gardens that are also present at each participating school.

The HCFC spearheaded this project after feedback from focus groups with farmers suggested using hydroponic systems to provide students with education around nutrition and preparing healthy meals. The funding for this project was provided by the Maryland Department of Health's Cancer and Chronic Disease Bureau and the Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Control.

To learn more about the Council, visit the Howard County [Local Health Improvement Coalition Food Council webpage](#). The Council's establishment was announced in January 2025, and the press release can be found on the [Howard County Health Department website](#).