

# Helping eliminate food deserts

BY DARIN LEACH

**F**OOD deserts are geographic areas where access to affordable and healthy food options is limited. While these areas are mostly associated with high-populated cities and metropolitan communities, food deserts can also be in rural areas — even in Iowa.

The latest food access research atlas maintained by USDA Economic Research Service shows pockets of food deserts across the state, with the highest concentration in southern Iowa, where eight adjoining counties all have some level of food access issues. The USDA research tool compares data, including food-access indicators for low-income areas, census tracts and supermarket accessibility. It assists community leaders with planning and research to improve food access.

An example of local leaders working to remove their community from the food desert map is Ottumwa in Wapello County, where this fall a dedication ceremony was held at a new greenhouse facility that will expand work opportunities for people with disabilities and increase local food options throughout southeast Iowa.

The 88-by-128-foot, four-bay hydroponic greenhouse, operated by Tenco Inc., received a \$70,000 USDA Rural Development grant to help purchase equipment used inside the facility.

“We are very pleased to be a partner with this exciting greenhouse project that both builds opportunities for people with disabilities to work and learn life skills and also expands opportunities to purchase locally grown foods,” says Bill Menner, USDA Rural Development state director.

The greenhouse project received financial gifts from foundations including the Ottumwa Regional Legacy Foundation, John Deere Foundation, Wapello County Foundation and Tenco Foundation, along with South Central Behavioral Health Region, and David and Sheryl North who gifted the property for the site.

“This amazing facility would not be a reality today without our many donors, friends and benefactors,” says Mendy McAdams, Tenco marketing and development director. “From the ground it sits on, to the gravel on the driveway, to the equipment inside, each piece fell into place, thanks to wonderful supporters of our organization.”

## Helping disabled people

The greenhouse has the capacity to raise 1,440 tomato plants, along with 9,300 plant positions for lettuce, with additional space



**GOOD IS GROWING:** A ribbon-cutting ceremony this fall celebrated a new greenhouse operated by Tenco Inc. near Ottumwa. The facility will expand work opportunities for people with disabilities and increase local food options in southeast Iowa.



**BUY FRESH, BUY LOCAL:** The new greenhouse site will allow Tenco to expand the number of grocery stores, restaurants, markets, food pantries and soup kitchens receiving fresh produce from its facilities.

for 6,400 nursery positions. All plants are grown without the use of soil and are fed purified water with nutrients, giving the hydroponic tomatoes higher sugar content and more intense flavor when picked in their final stage of ripening. Each tomato plant in the greenhouse can produce up to 60 pounds of fruit annually.

The greenhouse will provide more than 80 paid vocational training and employment opportunities for people with disabilities, rotating in groups of 10 throughout the year, along with training and supervisory positions. An adjacent multiple-purpose building has areas for grading, washing and packaging, along with a loading dock, room for on-site cooling and a conference room. A corridor between the buildings assists in keeping the greenhouse sterile.

Tenco was founded in 1965 and serves more than 300 people with disabilities through vocational centers, day programs and residential services in Fairfield, Ottumwa, Keosauqua, Oskaloosa, Knoxville and Centerville.

“Our mission is to provide opportunities for people with disabilities, to develop and maintain independence in all areas of life,” McAdams says. “This greenhouse adds another resource to expand opportunities for our clients and increase their marketability.”

## Fresh produce available

Tenco operates a smaller greenhouse at its Fairfield site and sells produce to outlets such as Market on Main in Ottumwa, Hy-Vee stores in Ottumwa and Fairfield, the farmers market in Fairfield, On-the-Green Restaurant in Oskaloosa, the Grass Roots Café in Humeston, and at the Drakesville produce auction.

This new site near Ottumwa will allow Tenco to meet the needs of more grocery stores and restaurants in a larger coverage area. “When it hits full capacity, we will be able to sell pesticide-free fruits and vegetables to more locations consistently,” McAdams says. “We want to be able to make fresh produce available to anyone who wants and needs them.”



**WHY HYDROPONIC?** Tomatoes grown in a hydroponic system have higher sugar content and more intense flavor when picked in their final stage of ripening.

About 10% of what is grown in Tenco greenhouses is given to local food banks and soup kitchens as a small way to express gratitude to the community, friends and donors who helped make the projects possible. “This is such a valuable asset for the entire area,” McAdams adds. “As our production continues to grow, we are expanding the fresh fruit and vegetable options for all local citizens.”

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