

IMPACT

Matanuska Experiment Farm and
Extension Center

Socially distanced community potato harvest on Matanuska Farm supplies food for families

Issue

The Matanuska Experiment Farm and Extension Center hosts an annual potato harvest for community members. The harvest is usually held in early October and anyone is welcome to attend. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the farm closed its doors to the public in March, and it was uncertain whether the harvest would take place.

Response

The potato harvest is an opportunity for the farm to provide food for families, while showing them where their food comes from. Theresa Isaac, an administrative assistant at the farm, recognized the importance of continuing the tradition and worked toward making modifications that would allow the harvest to take place. The Alaska Plant Materials Center donated 135 varieties of seed potatoes and staff tended the plots.

At harvest time, new policies, such as preregistration, limiting the harvest to 30 families, splitting the attendees into two time slots and keeping groups 6 feet apart, were implemented to ensure public safety. One family at a time checked in and employees wore masks and gloves to limit contact. During the harvest, staff were positioned around the plots to ensure people were distancing and not harvesting outside of their designated area. The previous year, the tops of the plants were cut off and people went around and dug any varieties they wanted. This year, each group was assigned a plot with four varieties of potatoes, and a potato harvester brought the potatoes to the surface so people didn't have to use tools to dig them, reducing the time everyone had to be around each other.



Young potato pickers show off their treasures harvested during the Matanuska Experiment Farm's community potato harvest.

Results

Because modifications that ensured social distancing were implemented, many families were able to attend the harvest and supplement their food supply. In total, 2,441 pounds of potatoes were harvested between 30 Mat-Su families, two food distribution organizations, Frontline Mission and Kids Kupboard, and six staff families. Isaac said that as she was weighing potatoes, many families told her they would be sharing their harvest with others.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Theresa Isaac

Administrative Assistant
Matanuska Experiment Farm and
Extension Center
tmissaac@alaska.edu
907-745-3360



Agriculture,
Natural Resources
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