Rentz is one of more than 100 food service directors throughout the state to participate in farm to school efforts, working with area farmers like Webb to provide fresh food for the schools. “It’s a nice way to support our local farmers, many of whom have children in the district,” says Rentz.

Since committing to local foods three years ago, Rentz has relied heavily on University of Minnesota Extension resources, which facilitate farm/school relationships and educate both parties on how to work together successfully. Last year, Rentz attended a Farm to Cafeteria workshop organized by Extension in partnership with several supporting organizations. The workshop, one of eight in 2010, featured a panel of producers, food service personnel, and educators with direct farm to school experience who discussed getting started, rules and regulations, and how to overcome barriers. Following the panel, participants “speed-networked,” pairing food service directors with farmers like Webb in four-minute periods, resulting in many new contacts.

“It’s been extraordinarily successful,” says Stephanie Heim, Extension farm to school coordinator. “Many farm to school programs are a direct result of farmers and food service providers who connected through those workshops.”

Heim also introduces food service directors to Extension community nutrition educators, many of whom are already active in the schools, teaching children about healthier eating habits. “Kids have to like and consume the food before it can impact their health,” says Donna Anderson, a Wadena County-based Extension community nutrition educator and one of more than 100 such educators statewide.

Throughout the school year, Anderson delivers hands-on nutrition education to encourage kids to eat more fruits and vegetables. By connecting with food service directors like Rentz, Anderson can tie a classroom tasting lesson to a local food also scheduled for the school menu.
Independent of kids’ taste buds, understanding and patience is required for schools and producers to work together. Both Heim and Terry Nennich, Extension horticulture educator, help them navigate the partnership. Nennich offers training for growers like Webb on how to provide for schools. “Many schools aren’t equipped to process local foods,” Nennich says. “We work with growers to think about products that don’t need a lot of prep—cherry tomatoes, melons, apples, carrots and sweet corn, for example.”

Another issue in Minnesota is that the main growing season occurs outside of the school year. Nennich introduces the concept of high tunnels—solar-heated greenhouses, which can extend the growing season by five to six weeks. He is currently working with Wadena-Deer Creek High School to construct high tunnels on the school grounds.

In her own high tunnels, Webb has planted hundreds of cherry tomatoes in preparation for the 2011–12 school year. “The school said it would take as many tomatoes as we could produce for summer school and into the fall,” she says. “It’s wonderful to know I’m providing those kids with fresh fruits and vegetables.”

For more information on Extension farm to school resources for farmers, schools, parents and teachers, visit www.extension.umn.edu/farm-to-school