For the love of vegetables

While living in downtown St. Paul during residency, Andrea Westby, MD, and her husband often spent Saturday mornings at the farmer’s market. As they wandered the aisles, they challenged themselves to try different vegetables. “We would ask the vendors ‘What is this? What can you do with it?’” she says of things like bok choy, kohlrabi and beet greens. “We got adventurous with trying to do things with what was available locally.”

Those trips to the market were the beginning of a love affair with vegetables for the Perham, Minnesota, family physician. “I love to build new dishes and try new foods, and I love the idea of being able to show people how you can eat things like kale and like it,” she says.

So when Sanford Health’s Perham clinic, where Westby works, received a grant from the state to help improve the health of people with hypertension and diabetes, she thought they should focus on cooking and eating.

At the urging of her nurse practitioner partner, who knew about Westby’s passion for produce and her creative cooking skills, Westby agreed to teach four community education classes this summer on using different vegetables. “I’m not a chef by any means,” she says, “but as long as people didn’t expect to learn knife skills, I was fine with cooking in front of them.”

Westby was pleasantly surprised to see the high school’s family and consumer science room filled with colleagues, patients and other members of the community for the initial session in June on preparing, storing and pairing greens, including Swiss chard, collard greens, spinach and kale, with other foods. A number of participants signed up on the spot for the remaining classes on peppers and cruciferous vegetables; squashes; and root vegetables.

Westby says her goal is to make using vegetables approachable. “I don’t want people to be overwhelmed by recipes that need a lot of ingredients,” she says, adding that some of the ones she used in class are her own inventions.

She says she’s learned from the experience of teaching. “I’ve always been able to talk to patients about food and nutrition and give them some specifics,” she says. “But because I did more research into each of the items I used, I can teach it better and better express what kind of nutritional value they have.” – KIM KISER