



Making an impact in community and youth gardens

Background

Research supports many positive impacts of community and youth gardens for the communities and individuals they serve. Among other outcomes, gardens and garden-based education programs have been linked to increases in nutrition knowledge^{1,2} consumption of fruits and/or vegetables^{3,4,5} and food security^{6,7}.

The University of Wisconsin-Extension has a long history of involvement in local efforts related to youth and community gardens. Extension educators fill many roles, such as teaching horticultural skills to jail inmates, coordinating garden efforts, and offering nutrition programs to low-income youth.

This report highlights the contributions and impacts of Family Living Programs involvement in these Extension garden program efforts.

Family Living garden programming

A recent survey documented Extension's involvement with nearly 100 garden programs across 45 counties in 2011. Over half of these involve Family Living colleagues (including the Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program, or WNEP). The programs are either youth garden efforts (47%) or community garden efforts (45%), though some are a combination of community and youth gardens (8%).

Family Living garden education program goals include:

- Teaching nutrition education in garden settings
- Providing skills to grow, preserve and prepare healthy food
- Improving food security by providing garden produce to low-income families or food pantries

Frequently, Family Living also plays a role in planning and coordinating garden programs, usually as part of a local coalition or committee.

Garden programs are making an Impact

Through direct contact, Family Living staff reached approximately 3,500 adults and 2,000 youth in garden programs in 2011. WNEP colleagues reached over 4,000 learners with lessons on using garden produce between October 2010 and September 2011. Examples of the impacts achieved for families and for communities include:

- **Increased knowledge about nutrition or food preparation and preservation techniques.**

In 2011, **Oconto County** UW-Extension teamed with WIC and New View Industries, a center for disabled adults, to provide programs in gardens. The learners translate familiar messages like "eat more fruits and vegetables" into actual practice, and to understand how the foods being eaten in their place often contribute to increased

"Garden programs provide opportunities for nutrition education, healthy lifestyle changes, and improved food security."

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overweight and obesity. The programs included lessons at WIC sites, group food preparation classes at New View Industries, and visits to the Oconto Community Garden, where they received lessons about nutrition, sampled fresh fruits and vegetables, and harvested some of the produce.

As a result of these programs, 665 WIC learners increased their knowledge of the benefits of gardening or of shopping for locally grown fruits and vegetables, including eating them at their peak taste and nutritional value. In food preparation classes, 43 independently living developmentally disabled learners from New View increased their ability to conveniently incorporate fruits and vegetables into their meals.

- **Changed attitudes about fruit and vegetable consumption**

Research indicates that when children have repeated experience with new foods, their preference for that food tends to increase. In **Eau Claire County**, garden education programs were used to expose children to fruits and vegetables in a positive, nonthreatening environment. In 2011, Eau Claire County teamed with local partners to reach 111 youth with a series of nutrition lessons in gardens.

A pre- and post-evaluation of school-aged youth completing the program showed that they became more willing to eat vegetables after growing them in the garden. For example, after the garden education programs, the percentage of youth who stated they were willing to eat bok choy rose to 52% (from 17% prior to the program), zucchini to 74% (from 48%), and pea pods to 91% (from 61%). Important

connections were made between gardening and a healthy lifestyle. Throughout the program, youth gained a greater appreciation for how their food is grown.

- **Increased food security**

In 2009, **Kewaunee County UW-Extension** provided leadership to a planning committee to develop a community garden. Steps included developing a lease, developing promotional materials, presenting programs, writing news articles, securing funds, educating gardeners, supporting the garden development, providing educational materials at critical times during the growing season, and evaluating the project.

The garden was an overwhelming success with 55 plots rented after only two years. Gardeners reported adopting a variety of healthful practices including donating food to the local pantry.

Among outcomes measured, gardeners reported they ate more fruits and vegetables (84%); spent less money on food (76%); preserved or stored food for the future (84%); and donated/gave extra food to others (92%). By 2011, gardeners had donated 631 pounds of food to the local food pantry. After this initial success, Extension provided guidance for two more garden expansions, one in 2012 and another started in 2013.

- **Improved outreach to underserved populations**

For more than a decade, the UW-Extension nutrition education program in **Waukesha County** has had a strong relationship with the county's Huber Work Release facility. A needs assessment determined that Huber inmates have problems with access to fruits and vegetables.

They simply could not afford them and their families' diets were lacking produce. In response, Extension's nutrition program and horticulture staff worked together to teach hour-long lessons for work release inmates each week during the growing season in a large garden plot set aside for instruction. In the summer of 2012, the program reached 180 learners in all.

Significant impacts were measured on evaluations administered after lessons on increasing vegetable consumption, eating more fiber, and physical activity. An impressive 87% of learners said they would eat more vegetables as a result of the lesson, 77% indicated they would eat good sources of fiber often, and 84% of participants said they would try to get the recommended amount of physical activity often. Learners not only expressed an intent to change their behavior, several participants commented that they had begun eating more vegetables and choosing beans as a result of the lessons.

Together, these examples illustrate the breadth and impact of Family Living's garden education programs. The scope of garden programs associated with improved nutrition, lifestyle changes for healthy living, and improved food security combine to create environments where families and communities can thrive.

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Family Living Programs

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Notes

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