

Cultivating Prosperous Community Gardens

Rooting Farm to School in the Community

Improving access to healthy, local foods is one of the fundamental goals of farm to school, as all children have the right to a nutritious diet. Providing educational opportunities for students to learn first-hand about agriculture and the nutritional value of fruits and vegetables can also help build healthy minds and bodies.

There is also a need to achieve these objectives beyond the school grounds. Many community members lack adequate financial and physical access to fresh produce, as well as knowledge about how to prepare nutritionally balanced meals.

Community gardens, which can easily be united with farm to school efforts, provide an excellent avenue for improving the nutritional and physical health of the whole community.



Fresh zucchini harvest from the Sparta High School Tennis Court Garden (Photo: Monroe County Schools on the Go)

Monroe County: “Serving” Vegetables to the Community

Monroe County Schools provides a shining example of thinking outside the box, or in this case, outside the court. In a brilliant repurposing effort, a Sparta High School tennis court in need of major repairs was converted into a community garden that is now bursting with fresh vegetables and strong community partnerships.



Sparta High School students installing and planting the raised beds (Photo credit: Monroe County Schools on the Go)

The garden “broke ground” this past spring with 12 wheelchair-accessible raised garden beds, constructed from local lumber. They were installed and filled with soil by students in the Sparta High School woods class. Just a few days after the beds were installed, students from the agriculture class transplanted seedlings that they had propagated months prior. From tomatoes and acorn squash, to radishes and dill, the agriculture students planted a diverse variety of crops for the community to enjoy.

The Sparta High School Garden was built for use by both the school and community. Despite it being the inaugural year, the garden has already produced a number of strong inter-community relationships that support the mission of providing fresh food to those in need.

Cultivating Prosperous Community Gardens

Rooting Farm to School in the Community

Monroe County: “Serving” Vegetables to the Community (continued)

In the peak harvest months of summer, the garden beds are tended to by dedicated community volunteers and school families who signed up to become part of the Sparta Family Garden Club. In return for their hard work in the garden, volunteers are able to enjoy the produce they pick by taking it home to their family. Extra produce is then served to students participating in the free summer meals program. Any excess produce left at this point is provided to local food pantries and senior meal sites.

This partnership between the school and community enables the district to manage the food resources, while allowing for all members of the community to benefit from the produce grown at the garden.



Sparta High School Garden in full swing. (Photo: Monroe County Schools on the Go)

During the school year, the Sparta High School nutrition services team plans to harvest vegetables grown just up the hill in the tennis court garden. These fresh produce items will be served on the cafeteria salad bar. Farm to school staff hope to eventually fulfill a significant proportion of school meal requirements with produce picked directly from the garden.

Plans are in place to gradually expand the Sparta High School Garden, both by increasing the number of beds and by extending the garden’s reach into the community. To help guide this process, an informal group of regional school and community garden volunteers met several times to share best practices for school gardens and to brainstorm collaborative approaches to help sustain gardening efforts.

The gardening group meetings also covered topics ranging from volunteer recruitment strategies to using garden calendars and constructing and managing hoop houses. In

addition, the group brought together potential partners, including Monroe County Schools on the Go, food service directors, hospital staff, food pantries and The United Way.



Summer school meals were prepared with produce from the tennis court garden (Photo: Monroe County Schools on the Go)

It is the hope of many in the county that a strong network of school and community gardens will improve access to fresh and healthy foods in area communities.

Cultivating Prosperous Community Gardens

Rooting Farm to School in the Community

Kenosha County: Paying it Forward, One Garden at a Time

Harborside Community Urban Garden in Kenosha County has found a way to organically increase the number of community gardens in the region. For several years now, professor Prisca Moore at Carthage College has integrated the Harborside Community Urban Garden into the curriculum for two of her classes for adult learners. As part of the first class, *Community Supported Agriculture*, education students head into the garden once a week for three months during the summer to learn about sustainable agricultural practices and service learning, all by placing their hands in the soil.

In the second class in the series, *Forming and Funding Partnerships for Environmental Education*, students focus on how to write grant proposals and find alternative ways to sustain garden programs. This teaching model has been so successful that a number of students have returned to their hometowns to start a community garden of their own!

Carthage College has been so pleased with this success, that they are in the process of creating a science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) minor for Education majors. The minor will have two tracks, one of which being the Life Sciences track. For those students that choose this course of study, a possible fieldwork placement will be at one of fifteen (and growing) Kenosha Unified School District (KUSD) garden sites. In addition to designing and delivering lessons to elementary students on topics ranging from nutrition to soil sciences, student teachers will also help plant and maintain garden sites.

The Carthage College and KUSD partnership is officially known as The Food for Learning Project. The goal of the collaboration is to help a new generation of teachers understand how impactful it can be to connect the school with the community by way of a shared project.



Harborside Academy student tends to the garden
(Photo: Harborside Community Urban Garden)



Carthage College “outdoor classroom” for student teachers at Harborside Community Urban Garden (Photo: Harborside Community Urban Garden)

Cultivating Prosperous Community Gardens

Rooting Farm to School in the Community

LESSONS LEARNED

From Trowels to Turnips: Assembling a Community Garden

Just like any project, starting a community garden requires a number of inputs. Thankfully, there are plenty of ways to secure the necessary elements to get a garden up and running in your own neighborhood. Here are a few suggestions for where to start:

LAND: Schools, local businesses, municipal government, hospitals, food pantries, homeless shelters, libraries, churches

LABOR: Community garden clubs, senior groups, Boys & Girls Club, afterschool students, Master Gardeners, school families, Boy & Girl Scouts, church volunteers, university interns or volunteers, teachers

- Can “adopt-a-week” or “a-day-a-week” for garden maintenance
- Use a website and other forms of social media to keep work groups updated

WATER: Municipal government, school administration, business sponsorship

GARDEN TOOLS: School donation drive, garden supply stores, Habitat Restore

LUMBER (for raised beds): School shop classes, local lumberyards, home improvement stores

SEEDS AND SEEDLINGS: School agriculture or Future Farmer’s of America classes, greenhouses or garden supply stores, community garden clubs

SOIL, MULCH, ETC.: Community gardeners, greenhouses or garden supply stores, municipal government

GARDEN MANAGEMENT: Volunteer coordinator, apply for a grant to cover the position, AmeriCorps member, local public health department staff, University of Wisconsin-Extension employee

HARVEST HOMES: Provide free to volunteers, donate to food pantries, senior meal programs, homeless shelters, Gleaner’s programs, incorporate into the school meal program, sell at the local farmers’ markets

FORWARD MOMENTUM: Contact local media to write about the garden(s), post on social media, hold community events like Harvest Luncheon’s or garden bus tours and invite local stakeholders and legislators

Cultivating Prosperous Community Gardens

Rooting Farm to School in the Community

RESOURCES

Community Garden Policy Reference Guide (Public Health Law Center)

This Guide provides an overview of legal and policy considerations for local governments and community members when implementing a community garden or community garden policy. It addresses policies impacting community gardens from the following angles: local government, land use planning and zoning, community garden group considerations, and liability.

http://www.publichealthlawcenter.org/sites/default/files/resources/PHLC%20Community%20Garden%20Policy%20Guide%202012_0.pdf

University of Wisconsin Extension: People and Plant Series

Learn about the many types of community gardens and the benefits they can offer to individuals and communities. This publication also includes information on what to consider before starting a garden and a separate list of resources for additional learning.

<http://fyi.uwex.edu/peopleplants/publications/>

University of Wisconsin Extension: Food and Ecosystem Educational Demonstration Sites (FEEDs)

FEEDs is a grant-funded project, facilitated by the University of Wisconsin-Extension, to link individuals in common ground gardening projects so that they can share research and resources.

<http://feeds.uwex.edu/index.cfm>

Gardening Matters

A non-profit organized by community gardeners and based in the Twin Cities, Gardening Matters provides training and resources to support sustainable community gardens.

<http://www.gardeningmatters.org/>

Dane County Community Gardens

This county-level community garden website provides a number of helpful resources for gardeners and garden leaders, alike. From comprehensive guides on how to get your community garden off the ground to leadership and facilitation tips and example organizational documents, this site can get you well on your way to starting a successful garden site in your community.

<http://danecountycommunitygardens.org/resources/>

WISCONSIN COMMUNITY GARDEN EXAMPLES

Manitowoc Grow It Forward Community Garden:

<https://www.facebook.com/growitforward.wi?fref=nf>

Down to Earth Gardening (Kenosha County):

<http://www.downtoearthkenosha.org/Home.html>