

Vegetable Gardening in Small Spaces

Situation

The faltering U.S. economy has resulted in many Americans evaluating their budgets for potential cost savings. Some Americans have cut back on their food budgets by purchasing foods locally or are considering growing their own vegetables this season. Interest in home gardening has also been elevated by recent food safety issues, which has made Americans question whether our food production infrastructure is safe. Most people converting from their primary role as vegetable consumer to vegetable producer, have little experience in vegetable production. Furthermore, many of these new converts often have little usable space for vegetable production.

Response

To promote the value of UW-Extension in Door County and address the need for educational resources for beginning gardeners and gardening in small spaces, our team converted gardens normally used to produce flowers at the Door County Government Center to productive vegetable gardens. The vegetable gardens served as a focal point of educational programs which focused on vegetable gardening and food preservation. Vegetable gardening educational programs followed a seasonal progression, starting with soil sampling and soil basics, designing a vegetable garden in small spaces, and garden pests and beneficial natural enemies. In addition, to increase food security, educational programs were developed on food preservation, including canning, freezing, and drying. The gardens were replicated at the Peninsular Agricultural Research Station (PARS), and production data was recorded.

This project was a collaborative effort of all program areas, including the Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program (WNEP). The program fit well into WNEP's theme in promoting nutrition and creating awareness for food insecurity issues. Family Living used the vegetable garden in programming efforts promoting the consumption of more fruits and vegetables. Agriculture used the garden to promote gardening and as a research tool to determine how much food can be produced in a small space. Other program areas on the team helped plan, promote, establish, and maintain the gardens.

Evidence

The vegetable gardens served as a focal point to the community and helped in promoting UW-Extension programming efforts. The vegetable gardens were highly praised by Door County Board Supervisors as they passed by them to their committee or monthly County Board meetings. In this respect, the vegetable gardens impacted an untargeted audience and helped the Door County UW-Extension office build capacity among County Board Supervisors. Even though only one active farmer currently serves on the Door County Board of Supervisors, the garden connected Board members and transcended our efforts.

Educational programs were offered as short 25 minute "lunch and learn sessions". The idea here was to introduce a topic with a bit of general background information. The goal, however, was not to provide attendees with an overload of information, but to introduce UW-Extension as a resource that can provide answers to gardening and food preservation questions.

The vegetable gardens replicated at PARS were used as data collection for production. Results from 2009 are shown in Table 1. The vegetable gardens are being grown again in 2010 at the Government Center and at PARS and will provide a second year of data for gardening in small spaces. This information will be shared next Spring during lunch and learn sessions.

Table 1. Crop Production data for vegetable garden measuring 13.5 x 5 ft.

Crop	Area planted	Production
	Square feet	Fresh weight lbs
Lettuce	1.5	2.1
Mixed greens	2.3	1.4
Parsley	1.5	1.3
Cilantro	2.3	1.2
Basil	2.3	1.4
Onions	4.5	9.3
Beets	2.5	4.8
Cucumber	4.0	7.2
Green Beans	4.0	2.5
Sweet/Hot peppers	4.0	4.2
Carrots	4.5	8.1
Tomato	7.5	13.1

In conclusion, conducting a season long project that has high visibility to County employees, County Supervisors, and the general public can go a long way in promoting UW Extension as a thriving resource engine. The overall focus of this effort was to use a garden as a backdrop to promote educational programs on gardening and food preservation. The educational programs were not constructed to give all the answers and therefore were maintained as 25 minute lunch and learn sessions. The educational sessions allowed the introduction of Extension staff and who we are as a resource. The overall impact of the project can best be ascertained by the positive comments of Door County Board Supervisors and the Door County Board of Supervisors asking UW-Extension to repeat the project in 2010.