

Situation

Community gardens provide health and learning opportunities for individuals, enhance local food security initiatives, and convey a positive community image. However, resources and support are needed to unlock these benefits. Because UW-Extension and WNEP provide education, operational assistance, and technical support, we are well positioned to add value to such projects. This past spring, the caretakers of two separate efforts in Marinette and Oconto Counties worked with us to expand and improve their gardens. The coalition supporting the Oconto Community Garden, located at the elementary school, sought help with operating costs and wanted to expand on-site learning opportunities. The second site, the Crossroads Community Garden near Peshtigo, is located at a group home facility for youth. Caretakers contended with pest damage, poor soil quality, and the need for equipment.

Response

This spring, Oconto/Marinette County WNEP Program Coordinator John Pinkart applied for and received district grants to help these projects improve their community gardens. Together with our county extension offices, we also assisted with various organizational and planning aspects of the projects, utilized the gardens as “outdoor classrooms” for food stamp learners, facilitated the distribution of the garden harvests to reach needy families, and served as a technical resource for maximizing crop production at the gardens.

Results

The funding secured for these projects was a springboard for learning about gardening and good nutrition. The activity based-learning provided for over 100 learners by WNEP educators at the Oconto garden allowed them to see, touch, smell, and taste "nutrition." It complimented Extension’s ongoing role in making the project a learning resource for teachers and students—giving many children their first experience with hands-on gardening—and supported WNEP’s work over the past five years to make the garden a mechanism for enhancing local food security; about 1,000 pounds of fresh produce has been donated annually to needy families.

In contrast to the needs of the more established Oconto garden, the Crossroads staff used the district funding to address basic requirements, such as deer fencing, a tiller, lumber, and tools, and worked with Marinette County UW-Extension to improve soil quality and plan a raised bed layout for the garden. Not only did caretakers revitalize a project that serves as a diversion for youth experiencing difficult times by engaging them in positive, productive activities, but they were also able to donate surplus produce to another nearby residential facility.

Evidence

At the Oconto garden, WNEP evaluated the impact of its gardening-related education. A core group of learners was surveyed to determine what benefits they derived from the garden: A Before and After evaluation of 18 learners revealed a 61% increase in the number reporting that they “always” or “often” ate two or more vegetables at their main meals. Another group of 11 learners unanimously indicated that participation in the garden had increased both their physical activity levels and saved them grocery money.

Crossroads facility directors shared a written summary of their project. Comments included: “We would like to thank the UW Extension for leading us in the right direction for a successful garden. The layout plan we received and the idea of boxes and mulch were great. The residents learned and helped cook different recipes and were able to try veggies they haven’t in the past. When parents came out for meetings or visits, all were very receptive to the garden.”

Our contributions to these community garden projects provide good evidence of Transformational Education: They helped strengthen community relationships, made things better than they were before, and helped people in our communities to better know, value, and trust Extension.