

Little Green Thumbs Project A Success in Oconto County

This spring, licensed daycare centers in Oconto and Oconto Falls expressed interest in establishing on-site gardens at their facilities. Their visions became reality thanks in large part to the efforts of WIC Program Director Hope Kersten and Public Health Nurse Mary LeMere, who worked with WNEP Coordinator John Pinkart to secure UW-Extension Eastern District Innovative Grant funding to establish the projects. Hope and Mary worked with each center to identify needs and develop budgets, and once the funding was received, coordinated the purchasing of equipment and seeds, while the Center Coordinators recruited volunteers to break ground and get the projects under way.

The projects produced dividends on several fronts. For our WIC and Public Health Staff, this effort strengthened their outreach capacities, enabling them to form unique, non-traditional community partnerships, including the opportunity to provide educational programs for children at the centers with our WNEP educator. The center in Oconto Falls even distributed a portion of their harvest to WIC Program families in August. The gardens also added to the quality of services offered at the day cares, prompting one of the coordinators to write that “the entire center grew from the Garden Grant we received.”

But the most notable beneficiaries were the children and their families, and the best way to communicate this impact is through the comments of Daycare Center Coordinators, who provided written summaries for us:

- “It was such an experience for the kids to watch the plants sprout, grow and become vegetables.”
- “We used the vegetable for snacks and in our meal preparation. Trying them was new experience for many of our children and some really enjoyed them...many of our parents were amazed that their child would even try some of the things.”
- “Our garden was enjoyed by young and old together with a variety of experiences and a lot of educational opportunities. More than 80 participated in some way and it was exciting to hear the children talk to their parents, grandparents and the community.”
- “Produce was used every day in meals and snacks and extra produce was given to the parents. Some was also given to the Kingdom Come food pantry, and when we delivered it, some of the kids expressed the fact that their families used this pantry.”
- “The garden was especially helpful to one child, who is autistic. Our staff said the garden was “therapeutic and calming for him,” and his favorite part of summer was spending time in the garden. He was able to tell the difference between weeds and plants and taught the other kids how to tell them apart. As a result of him enjoying the garden so much, the family is planning to start a garden next year.”

The most important benefits of the Little Green Thumbs Project were to strengthen relationships between the WIC and Public Health Departments and the Day Care Centers (as well as to Oconto UWEX), to connect two of the county's largest day care centers to UW-Extension programs and resources, and to expose young children to the processes of nature and the joy and wonder of growing food. The center facilitators have indicated their enthusiasm for continuing and improving their garden projects this coming spring.

The Marinette/Oconto Wisconsin Nutrition Education Program is supported by the USDA Food Stamp Program, UW-Extension, FoodShare Wisconsin, and local partners. In Wisconsin, FoodShare can help provide a healthy diet. To find out more about FoodShare in Oconto County, call (920) 834-7000. In Marinette County, call (715) 732-7840. An Equal Opportunity/Affirmative Action employer, the University of Wisconsin-Extension provides equal opportunities in employment and programming including ADA and Title IX requirements.