



Food Security with a Community Garden

BY JENNIFER JENSEN

A community group provides garden plots for those who otherwise don't have access to land or don't have the ability to prepare their own garden.

Gardeners for Regional Organic Wellbeing (GROW!) was founded in the winter of 2008-09 by community members that were interested in promoting food security for Boundary County, Idaho. To address the issue of nutritious and safe food for those that might not be able to purchase such fresh vegetables, this grassroots organization formed the idea of a community garden to provide food to both the food bank that is often lacking in fresh produce and local gardeners interested in producing their own vegetables.

The goal of GROW! is to create a self-sufficient, food independent community by supporting local and regional food security systems and agricultural practices that enhance the ecological independence and economic sustainability of Boundary County. It is also the mission of the organization to bring the community together to realize the connections that can be made within

the community to further enhance its wellbeing.

GROW! spent the winter months planning for the project and the group constructed its community garden with 31 plots for community members, seven plots for the GROW! Organization, and two plots for educational demonstrations. At a cost of \$20 per plot, community gardeners received a four-foot by twenty-foot garden space that was tilled and amended with compost. The gardeners also received access to water, hoses and gardening tools for maintaining their gardens through the summer. A scholarship program was set up and utilized to waive the \$20 fee for those gardeners that might not be able to afford it. GROW! also provided its community gardeners with free seeds that had been donated and transplants started by group members.

The garden has been a great success, offering apartment dwellers or others that live in much cooler climates in the mountains a location in the city of Bonners Ferry for growing a wide range of vegetables. The garden spaces have also been well utilized by those who are unable to do

the heavy work needed to start a garden. Colleen Bolles is one such gardener who is participating in the community garden. "I rented the garden plot to learn about gardening and because I needed someone else to do the heavy work like tilling, adding manure, and building a fence," said Ms. Bolles. "I learned by doing and by asking other gardeners at the community garden." Now Ms. Bolles is enjoying the harvest from her bountiful garden plot.

Beyond the Garden

The group is especially concerned with providing healthy food for underprivileged families within the county. Between the seven GROW! plots in the community garden and another separate garden, the group is able to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to the local food bank. Some of the produce is also sold at the Bonners Ferry Farmers' Market the proceeds of which are used to purchase commodities such as flour, rice, sugar, etc. to donate to the food bank.

Christine Villanueva is the service coordinator for the Community Action Partnership that runs a food bank in the city of Bonners Ferry, Idaho. "The donations

from the community garden have been a great help,” says Villanueva. According to her, more families utilize the services at the food bank in the summer when school is out of session. During the summer months these families lose two free lunches a week for their children that are offered during the school year at the school’s cafeteria. Fortunately other gardeners in the area also generously donate some of their harvest to the food bank. “The donations from the community garden make a great impact on the community,” said Ms. Villanueva, “By providing fresh vegetables to those who are unable to grow their own garden and can’t afford to purchase produce at a store.”

Educational Outreach

GROW! has worked with the University of Idaho Extension to provide educational opportunities relating to local food security. An in-class workshop for 4th and 5th grade science students at Evergreen Elementary School took place in the spring of 2009 to help start seedlings for the garden. The class planted tomato, basil and marigold seeds. Many of these plants were then transplanted into the community garden and others were reared under grow lights at the school for the students to take them home for use in their own gardens. During

the workshop the students learned about the history of community gardens, and discussed tomatoes and why there are so many different cultivars available.

In addition to providing in-class workshops, GROW! offers hands-on learning opportunities at the community gardens. These garden workshops focus on enhancing local food production and have included:

- Basic gardening practices
- Edible container gardening
- Building a successful compost bin
- Weed control and mulching in a vegetable garden
- Storing garden vegetables for use through the winter

The garden staff set aside one demonstration plot that was used to educate students from the Riverside High School in Bonners Ferry on planting techniques. Another demonstration plot featured 13 tomato cultivars for gardeners to evaluate plant performance and taste.

Conclusion

The GROW! Community Garden has been a great success this summer. An empty, grassy lot has been converted into a beautiful garden that is providing fresh and

local produce to the community. Flowers flank the front fence and brighten many of the garden plots and a seating area in the garden provides rest for anyone who would like to sit and enjoy the splendor. In 2010 GROW! plans on expanding to include other gardens in the county with the intent of moving another step closer to the goal of a self-sufficient, food independent county. ●

About the Author

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Author’s Picks for Further Reading

GROW!

 growboundarycounty.org

American Community Gardening Association

 communitygarden.org

A Handbook of Community Gardening. Boston Urban Gardeners. Edited by Susan Naimark.

Brooklyn Botanic Garden All-Region Guides Community Gardening. Edited by Ellen Kirby and Elizabeth Peters.

