

## **Gardens**

### **Overview**

Gardens have long been an important source of fresh, nutritious food that households of all income levels have utilized for generations. However gardens play an especially important role for low-income households by providing a dependable source healthy, low-cost food that can significantly stretch limited food budgets and increase nutritional self-sufficiency. Use of canning and food preservation techniques ensures that garden produce is available year round.

In recent years the increased availability of a wide variety of community gardens has not only made gardening more accessible to individuals but has provided an important source of nutritious food for community organizations that serve low-income families like food pantries, meal sites, shelters, senior centers, youth programs, and schools. In addition to benefiting the community gardens also contribute to creating sustainable local food systems that bring positive environmental benefits.

### **Types of Gardens**

**Community Gardens.** These collaborative gardens bring together diverse community groups to establish gardens plots for individual gardeners, and/or community plots for food pantries, meal sites, senior centers, youth organizations or community institutions. They often serve as place where many different community resources come together from schools and civic groups providing volunteers to local nurseries and garden centers providing seeds or soil remediation. In the process these gardens naturally strengthen community connections and interdependence.

**Food pantry Gardens.** Local organizations can work both individually & collectively to manage vegetable gardens to supply fresh produce for distribution by pantry food or other community food or meal programs.

**Home Gardens.** Many families, especially in suburban and rural communities, have sufficient space to plant home gardens to supplement their food budgets. Research from the University of Pennsylvania has found that home gardens generated on average \$160 in produce.

**Container Gardens.** A variant of home gardening for urban and apartment residents who lack space for traditional gardens, this type of garden involves planting vegetables in a variety of containers (pots, plastic swimming pools, wooden half barrels) which can be placed on balconies, porches, window sills and rooftops.

**School & Youth Gardens.** Schools utilize gardens as educational tools for to teach students principles of science and horticulture, as well as provide opportunities for community service and produce for school meals. Gardens can be located on school grounds, in school greenhouses and in community gardens. Community youths groups like 4-H or scouting troops may also sponsor gardens or volunteer at community gardens.

**Correctional Facility Gardens.** Some correctional facilities grow vegetables on facility grounds to provide fresh produce for inmate meals but may also grow food for use by emergency feeding organizations or food banks. Not only do these gardens provide a valuable source of high quality food for local providers, but it also affords incarcerated individuals the opportunity to provide much needed service to families in their communities. The Portage, Cambridge, Oregon and Oshkosh correctional facilities operate vegetable farms.

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**Plant-A-Row.** This national network encourages home gardeners to plant additional rows of vegetables to donate to local food pantries. Sometimes community gardens will donate the harvest from household plots on a particular day to food providers. Local sponsors of Plant-A-Row must carefully coordinate community drop-off sites to ensure perishable produce is quickly collected and distributed.

**Community Supported Agriculture(CSA).** While not technically a garden, CSAs are a variety of vegetable farming in which the farmer sells seasonal shares of the harvest at a fixed price. Share sales provide farmers with money for planting and in return customers are guaranteed an equal share of the harvest during the growing season. CSAs increase links between consumers and farmers and encourage sustainable, local food systems. While typical CSA shares are expensive, some communities are reducing the cost for low-income households. Partner Shares in Madison charges low-income households one half the regular price of a share and relies on community donations and fund-raisers to pay the remainder.

### **Benefits & Impact of Gardens**

Gardens offer a wide range of benefits to low-income households and communities as well as the environment.

- By providing access to high quality vegetables gardens improve the nutritional quality of meals and help fight rising obesity rates.
- The low-cost of produce compared to retail markets helps households stretch their food budgets. Canning and freezing techniques enable gardeners to preserve their harvest and enjoy healthy foods year round.
- Home and Community gardens at encourage low-income households to directly grow their own food empower families and increase their nutritional and economic self-sufficiency.
- They provide an important source of food in Wisconsin for Hmong households accustomed to growing their own produce.
- Gardens create natural opportunities for social interaction, community connections and afford relaxing and healthful exercise.
- Gardens support sustainable food systems and local production with the consequent environmental benefits and strengthen connections between consumers and producers.
- Gardeners can control food quality by eliminating toxic chemicals & pesticides.

**Resources** Extension Horticulture Specialists and Master Gardeners provide important community expertise to local gardening projects. Over 2,400 Master Gardener volunteers through 45 local associations serve most Wisconsin counties by supporting the work of County Extension Ag Offices. Many community and food pantry gardens projects have been catalyzed, coordinated or sustained by local County Extension staff and Master Gardener volunteers. Other key players in local gardening projects include Hunger Prevention Councils, Community Action Agencies, food pantries, youth and civic organizations, schools, garden and landscape centers, and other local businesses.

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### **Positive Developments & Trends**

- An increased availability of community gardens provides a significant supply of local produce to needy households. Examples include: the Community Action Coalition for South Central Wisconsin, Inc. (Madison) that coordinates a network of 17 community gardens serving over 400 households that grow over 250,000 pounds of produce. Many gardeners are low-income or ethnic minorities. The Field of Dreams Garden coordinated by Kenosha County Extension offers a combination of rental gardens for personal use and free gardens for sponsoring individuals or organizations to grow food for 11 community food providers serving hundreds of low-income households.
- Pantry gardens – like Menominee Tribal food pantry garden in Keshena or the Rhinelander food pantry gardens. These provide substantial produce for families and bring together diverse community groups in support of the project.
- WISCAP initiated a statewide campaign to provide seed pack sets for complete home gardens to Community Action Agencies and other partners for distribution to over 6,000 food pantry clients to plant home gardens. Clients also received customized copies of Extension Planting Guides
- Extension efforts in Rock County and elsewhere are encouraging Head Start households to start gardening.

### **Concerns, Problems & Negative Trends**

- While the availability and variety of community gardens and rental gardens has increased significantly many locales lack community gardens.
- Urban and suburban gardens located on undeveloped private lands are increasingly under pressure from expanding development.
- Large urban communities with limited access to affordable and quality produce at farmers markets or retail grocery stores may lack available land for home or community gardens that could alleviate the shortage of fresh vegetables.
- Limited time and busy schedules have contributed to greater dependence on fast food outlets and ready-to-eat meals and have reduced use of gardens as a primary source of fresh food compared to earlier generations.
- Some pantry and community gardens are located on private land temporarily donated by the owners and have an uncertain future.

### **Gardening could play a more significant role if...**

- Every person visiting emergency food programs in Wisconsin, who has the interest and access to garden space, is provided free seed, seedlings, and gardening and food preservation information to encourage more home gardens and container gardens.
- Every person utilizing emergency food programs in Wisconsin, who has the interest but lacks adequate home garden space, has convenient access to a community garden space, including free seed, seedlings, as well as gardening and food preservation information and access to needed equipment.

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- Every person utilizing emergency food programs in Wisconsin, who lacks the capacity or interest, receives locally grown produce from a community gardening program.
- Every school in Wisconsin either operates their own garden/greenhouse or facilitates student involvement as volunteers at local community gardens to give them educational and service opportunities and provide produce for school meals or local food providers.
- Local Hunger Prevention Councils and emergency food provider that lack local food pantry gardens or community gardens explored the feasibility of establishing gardens in collaboration with other community partners like Extension, civic and youth groups.
- The state legislature provided incentives, such as tax credits, to individuals and businesses that donate land permanently to community gardening ventures.