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# Local food in every pot: Growing farmers in northeastern Iowa through public and private partnerships

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# Local food in every pot: Growing farmers in northeastern Iowa through public and private partnerships

## **Abstract**

A group of north Iowa urban women who faced numerous life challenges learned about self-sufficiency through their joint efforts of planning, planting, growing and harvesting produce from a community garden.

## **Keywords**

Community-based food systems, Farmer profitability enterprise budgets

## **Disciplines**

International and Community Nutrition



## Local food in every pot: Growing farmers in northeastern Iowa through public and private partnerships

**Abstract:** A group of north Iowa urban women who faced numerous life challenges learned about self-sufficiency through their joint efforts of planning, planting, growing and harvesting produce from a community garden.

### Principal Investigator:

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Center for Energy and Environmental Education  
University of Northern Iowa  
Cedar Falls

### Budget:

\$12,375 for year one  
\$12,933 for year two

**Q**How can opportunities be provided to learn economic self-reliance through access to land and gardening and skill development?

**A**A project in north Iowa showed how various groups worked together to help offer these opportunities to women, immigrants and new and transitioning growers.



**MARKETING**

### Background

This project provided access to land, horticultural and agricultural technical support, business planning, skills development, and direct marketing support and solutions to people who are interested in growing food for local consumption. Women, immigrants, and new and transitioning growers were targeted for sharing this information.

Through a partnership with a local group called the Women's Self-Sufficiency Program (WSSP), a project led by Cheryl Fairies and Al Hayes of UNI's Public Policy Program, 15 women were recruited for participation in this project. WSSP offers life skills training for women exiting the criminal justice system in Waterloo, Iowa. Many of these women are low-income, single mothers, members of minority groups, and have little work history to draw on. Additionally, most of these women receive assistance from the Northeast Iowa Food Bank via the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and rely heavily on public transportation to get around the community. The women began meeting with WSSP for general life skills training in summer 2011.

### Approach and methods

The year-long WSSP effort was designed to culminate in a final group project. The women chose to plant a garden with the goal of setting up a neighborhood farm stand where they could sell their harvested produce. ISU Extension and Outreach offered tuition for the women to enroll in their Master Gardener project in Black Hawk County. The women attended the classes as a group in the winter, and began planning for planting in the spring.

Iowans for Social and Economic Development had committed to designing a business startup series based on the women's needs that they would attend in the late winter/early spring of 2012. Unfortunately, ISED closed its Waterloo office and could not fulfill this commitment at the last minute. Remaining project stakeholders quickly tried to pick up the pieces and deliver relevant information as part of a substitute course.

The women collaborated to design a logo for a garden sign, which was an African symbol meaning "revitalization". The logo was incorporated into a sign hung at the



garden, along with logos of the project sponsors.

After several garden planning sessions, the women chose to plant vegetables that they felt were culturally relevant and would sell well in their neighborhood (northeast end of Waterloo). The women planted tomatoes, tomatillos, peppers, squash, collard greens, mustard greens, kale, watermelon, pumpkins and several herbs. Despite the early onset of spring, the women got a later start (mid-May) planting their garden than they had hoped. The garden was planted during a series of group work sessions that included neighbors and community members. The local newspaper, the *Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier*, interviewed the women and shot a video of the event.

An article told the community of the project, and the women were proud of the positive attention their work had received.

Throughout the growing season, the women scheduled evenly spaced weekly work shifts, with each shift staffed by two women. Each Thursday afternoon there was a large group work session, with the women often visiting the garden to work on their own in addition to their scheduled shifts. Despite their best efforts, the women's intentions to sell at a farm stand were thwarted by neighborhood deer that ate far too much of the produce and left too little to sell. As a result, the women decided to take harvested produce home to their families, and donate the remainder to their churches. Protective fencing will be part of future projects.

## Results and discussion

During the following growing season in 2013, ISU Extension staff worked within the same neighborhood and involved neighborhood children in gardening. UNI project staff, in collaboration with ISU Extension and the Healthy Cedar Valley Coalition, convened all who were involved in gardening in the Cedar Valley and all who were interested in starting more gardens to increase food access for those in need. This process has resulted in Cedar Falls and Waterloo offering city park land as potential garden sites. They also have volunteered to assist in tilling the garden land for selected entities managing the new gardens. Black Hawk County provided funds to purchase garden equipment and various other necessary garden supplies and pay for the printing and design of the garden sign.

The newly formed network—Cedar Valley Grows—is working with both Waterloo and Cedar Falls city governments, churches, neighborhood associations, and Hy-Vee (which has funded several school gardens), ISU and UNI. Project staff helped convene this group and have used Leopold Center funds to leverage more local funds to support this community initiative. The Cedar Valley Grows leadership has issued a request to community organizations in the Cedar Valley for applications; two new gardens in each community will be selected for development and educational programs. UNI project staff will be starting a one-third-acre garden in collaboration with the Northeast Iowa Food Bank, with all produce going to the Food Bank. UNI staff also has been involved in carrying out food systems assessment for Black Hawk and Grundy counties.

Three major challenges emerged during the course of the project. First, the UNI proj-



ect staffers who were working on this grant left the university. Second, WSSP, the community organization organizing the women's self-sufficiency program, dissolved when it lost funding in 2012. Third, the city of Waterloo used the proposed garden land for a new development. These are within the normal set of occurrences for this sort of community project. The key to future success is to garden on public land (rather than private land that could be turned to development), and involve many partners who can deliver what they promised to deliver.

## Impact of results

The most important impact of this project has been the development of Cedar Valley Grows, an organization offering technical assistance to increase the number and quality of community gardens in the area. This proved to be a strong regrouping of the original participants, who were deeply committed to serving Cedar Valley residents in need. In March 2013 a meeting was held to convene all community garden managers to develop Cedar Valley Grows for the next year.

## Cooperative efforts

A wide range of organizations and people contributed to this project, including:

- ISU Extension, Black Hawk County
- Healthy Cedar Valley Coalition
- Northeast Iowa Food Bank
- Hy-Vee
- Cedar Falls Community Gardens
- City of Cedar Falls
- City of Waterloo
- Blue Zones
- Black Hawk County Board of Supervisors
- Green Iowa AmeriCorps
- Jubilee United Methodist Church
- Iowans for Social and Economic Development
- Mt. Carmel Baptist Church
- UNI, Institute for Decision Making
- UNI, Public Policy Project

### ***For more information, contact:***

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## Leveraged funds

The project staff was able to secure additional local resources and funds related to this grant:

1. Guernsey Foundation of Waterloo, Iowa--\$5,000
2. Community Foundation of Northeast Iowa--\$8,000
3. Black Hawk County Board of Supervisors--\$5,000
4. Black Hawk County Board of Supervisors--use of 10 acres at no cost
5. ISU Extension, Master Gardener Class Scholarship--\$2,250 value