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.

What was done and why?

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.

What did we learn?

During the growing season in 2013, ISU Extension staff worked within the same neighborhood and involved neighborhood children in gardening. Also, 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.

MARKETING

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