Growing Food & Community in North Carolina Community Gardens

Lisa Pose1, Keith Baldwin1, Montreka Dansby2,3, Michelle Eley4, Sharon English5, Santos Flores6, Travella Free6, James Peele5, Melissa Tomas1, Michelle Wallace1 & Meeshay Williams-Wheeler5

1The Cooperative Extension Program North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University, Greensboro, NC  2Currently at Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA  3Scotland County NC Cooperative Extension, Laurinburg, NC  4Durham County NC Cooperative Extension, Durham, NC  5N.C. & T State University Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, Greensboro, NC

ABSTRACT

North Carolina has one of the highest rates of food insecurity in the United States, yet is also named the 10th most obese state. Community gardens, places where people work together to grow their own food, have been shown to increase access to healthy, affordable food. Faculty at The Cooperative Extension Program at N.C. A&T cooperate with local Extension agents, garden coordinators and community members to develop community gardens to address issues of food security and unhealthy diet in at-risk communities. In 2011, there were 53 families gardening at three community gardens in our target sites. Thirty-three of these families completed surveys or interviews about their experience participating in the community garden. Impact data shows that 97 percent (32) of those questioned have been successful in growing food for their families and 72 percent (24) say that they are eating more vegetables and/or are eating healthier.

“Trained gardeners...like before the garden we really didn’t eat many vegetables unless it was out of the can, but now we have free vegetables so we eat more vegetables” ~ gardener

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Target counties
From 2009 – 2014
- Bertie
- Scotland
- Durham

Program staff work together to:
1. Assess the community's interest in a community garden
2. Bring together county Extension staff with interested local partners and identify resources
3. Offer technical assistance and funding to prepare the garden site
4. Organize gardeners to encourage leadership and ownership of the garden
5. Offer educational opportunities related to growing, preparing and preserving food as well as entrepreneurship principles
6. Encourage new community connections through volunteers, funding, food donations, youth group participation, community-wide garden events, etc.
7. Provide ongoing technical assistance and financial support

Evaluation
- Surveys were distributed to all program participants
- Video interviews were conducted with several participants
- Harvest counts, volunteer hours, number of workdays and events, project partners and monetary and in-kind donations to the gardens were tracked

Online Marketing
- Blog – nccomunitygardens.blogspot.com
- Facebook Page (120+ followers)
- YouTube Video Page (30,200+ video views) – 16 Gardeners Sharing Knowledge how to videos, interviews with gardeners, introductions to the gardens, etc.

“I’m going to do more gardening and invite more people to come and see what we’re doing.” ~ youth gardener

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

- Established three new community gardens (53 families gardening)
- Connected 60+ community partners to the garden program
- Received $64,200+ in grants, in-kind donations and volunteers hours
- Received coverage in over 20 local, state and university publications
- Assistance has been requested in all three target counties for building additional community and school garden projects
- 21+ events and educational workshops included: preserving food, composting, trellising tomatoes, starting seeds, insect control
- Meal in the Garden, a field trip to another garden and a holiday potluck
- Extension specialists developed a Community Garden curriculum (in review) including sections on horticulture, community development, nutrition, parenting and youth agri-business

INTRODUCTION

The fact that North Carolina has both high rates of food insecurity and obesity indicates that many people don’t have access to and/or are not eating enough healthy foods like fruits and vegetables.

Community gardens have been shown to:
- Increase acceptance of regularly eating fruits and vegetables
- Increase access to healthy, affordable food
- Increase physical activity of gardeners
- Increase social interactions

Program objectives are to:
- Increase the number of families growing food
- Save families money on their food budgets
- Enhance the nutritional quality of family meals

Program goals are to:
- Increase community food security and access to healthy food
- Increase the number of community gardens in North Carolina
- Build community leadership to increase sustainability of community gardens

The target audience is:
- Families in North Carolina
- Youth groups interested in gardening and agri-business projects

“Who knew that we could have fun while growing things!” ~ youth gardener

IMPACTS

Economic Benefits – Participants saved money
- 97 percent have been successful in growing food for their families
- 67 percent indicated that they saved money or were going to save money by not having to buy as much produce at the store or market
- 27 percent said they are preserving the food they grow in their garden

Health Benefits – Participants eat more healthy food
- 85 percent were taking the food they grew home to eat and were eating more vegetables, eating healthier and/or were trying new vegetables they hadn’t eaten before
- Gardening was also noted as an excellent means of exercise

Community Benefits – New social connections were made
- 48 percent were sharing their food with other gardeners, friends, family members and/or church members
- Additional benefits included: meeting people and making new friends, being in nature, being in what they considered a safe environment, and the opportunity to have space/land to garden

“I really enjoy the camaraderie that comes from working in the garden.” ~ gardener

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The authors are grateful to:
- USDA NIFA for the CYFAR Sustainable Communities Project grant
- The Cooperative Extension Program at N.C. A&T State University and county Extension staffs
- The CYFAR garden coordinators and county agents for their tremendous hard work
- All the local partners and collaborators who have supported these community and school gardens in their community

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FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

- The outlook for long-term sustainability of the gardens is positive
- County Extension centers will continue to provide technical and educational support to gardens
- Expand program to additional counties in North Carolina

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