



CT OUTDOORS ~ Bring on the Community Gardens

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Ninety in five. No, it's not some post-derivatives investment scheme. It's the laudable goal of the Community Harvest Network (CHN), a collaboration of gardening and nutrition professionals, volunteers, and "grow your own" enthusiasts to dramatically expand the number of community gardens in New London County in the coming years.

There's only a handful of formal community gardens in the county right now, but that is changing rapidly, according to Dave Fairman, CHN program coordinator. Another 25 are in the works this year.

The collaboration, launched by the Thames Valley Council for Community Action (TVCCA), with charter members F.R.E.S.H (Food: Resources, Education, Security, Health), Ledge Light Health District, and Fairman's company New London Group, aims to help neighbors, schools, agencies, and individuals who want to grow, store, and prepare their own fresh local food. There are social as well as nutritional objectives at stake.

"Mainly, it's about improving nutrition, but it's also about improving neighborhoods, people getting together, working collaboratively," Fairman said.

CHN proponents point to evidence that higher levels of community gardening activities go hand in hand with decreased violence.

"It's also a way to avoid health-care costs down the line," he said.

The goal is that people, including children, will have access to and eat more fresh vegetables and get more exercise in the process, reducing the epidemic rates of diabetes, obesity, and related health problems.

Community gardens can come in all shapes and sizes, including collections of containers and raised garden beds. The four basic elements are soil, plants, people, and organization. Then add sunshine and lots of compost.

The ideal setting, according to Fairman, would be a piece of publicly owned land that gets a good six to eight hours of sunlight a day and is far enough away from roads, cars, and industrial activities that the soil is less likely to be contaminated by lead.

"We do a real thorough analysis of the soil," said Patrick Kelly, a volunteer who leads site development. "We have a five-year game plan of amending the soil every year, with compost, manure, and tilling it, to get that 26 inches of soil alive. Feed the microbes first, and then we'll get healthy vegetation and plants. People are encouraged when they see a good crop yield."

While the earthworms are doing their thing in the soil, the network looks for interested gardeners. Typically a garden will start with five or six people, and it spreads through word of mouth, according to Fairman. A group of about 30 gardeners and plots is a good critical mass for community spirit, sharing ideas, and future continuity.

Most plots are 4 by 15 or 20 feet. Using French intensive or Square-Foot gardening, where something new is planted every time a crop is harvested, can yield a surprising amount of food.

Gardeners can grow any crop they want, Fairman said, as long as it is legal and not invasive, and they are expected to follow organic gardening methods. The network also fosters access to gardening experts, master gardeners, UConn, the state Dept. of Agriculture, and the USDA.

There's an educational component to many of the gardens, Kelly said. Younger kids get excited about building tee-pees for pole beans and vines to climb and planting potatoes in compost towers, where, in 90 to 120 days, they can dig for hidden treasure.

"It's a whole big circle," Kelly said. "We get the seniors together, they reminisce about Victory gardens and canning what they grow, we talk to the kids about eating something other than junk food."

CHN is funded by federal stimulus grant funds through September and hopes to continue through other funding after that, Fairman said. The New London Group also operates Thames Valley Local Produce, which distributes local produce and provides consulting services to farmers, processors, and consumers.

"Our goal is to grow everything here, less importation, so we have much more nutritious produce," Fairman said. "It's also heartwarming to hear how we're helping to get some people back in touch through their community garden."

Existing gardens include the three AHEPA residential facilities in Groton, Niantic, and Waterford; 202 Coleman Community Garden in New London; Stonington Human Services Garden at 166 South Broad Street in Stonington; gardens at the Pawcatuck Neighborhood Center; and at multiple TVCCA sites and United Community and Family Services in Norwich.

You can follow these and other community gardens on the Community Harvest Network Facebook page. To get involved or get help from the network, call 860-857-1269 or e-mail CommunityHarvestNetwork@gmail.com.

Suzanne Thompson's "CT Outdoors" column was selected best agriculture-related series in a weekly newspaper in 2009 by the Connecticut Agricultural Information Council. Catch her weekly radio show on WLIS 1420 AM and WMRD 1150 AM, Tuesdays from 12:30 to 1 p.m., Saturdays at 1 p.m., or Sundays from 7 to 7:30 a.m. She can be reached at thompson@wliswmrd.net.