Project Description

The Crookston High School Garden, located next to the school itself, has yielded a significant amount of produce in the past year, with all harvest donated to the Crookston Care and Share. Although the growing season extends much into the summer, Principal Lon Jorsensen and teachers at the school have used their abilities and teaching opportunities to grow this project from the ground up.

Logistics

Lon Jorgensen, principal of Crookston High School, began planning the Crookston High School Garden upon his arrival at the school in August of 2010. Initially, the garden project cost over $1,000 in land preparation, which included trucking in 20 tons of sand for land drainage and at least two tons of manure to compensate for the poor natural soil quality of the plot, which is located next to the high school. “I literally had a yield of four jalapenos out of the garden last year,” said Lon.

This year, the garden has had a substantially larger yield. As of his interview in early August, the garden had yielded all kinds of produce, and the high school had already donated 131 pounds of fresh produce to the Crookston Care and Share, to which all of the produce is directed. “I think we'll expect to double or triple our current number by the end of harvest,” predicted Lon. Since our interview, the actual number has gravitated more toward 700 pounds in total.

The $500 mini-grant that the high school received this year from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota Foundation has kept the garden going and has provide for some well-appreciated improvements. Half of the funds were used to purchase a mini-tiller and Miracle Gro, with the remaining funds being allocated toward seed purchases and future expenses. The garden has also received funding from other sources, including private donations and “Jeans Day,” a collection in which faculty and staff pay on an honor basis for the option to wear jeans on designated days. So far, private donations have been able to pay for ongoing expenses such as garden utilities and supplies. In the future, Lon would like to save up for a shed to store tools and garden supplies.

Lon tries to incorporate different teachers at the high school in the garden decision-making process. One teacher, Jim Mulligan, helped with bedding plants, lining up rows, and watering with his DCD (Developmentally and Cognitively Disabled) class. In the spring, Jim and his class provided much of the labor for the garden, whereas Lon takes care of it during the summer.

All harvest of the Crookston High School Garden is donated to the Crookston Care and Share, which has happily taken in everything thus far. “They look forward to my visits,” reported Lon, smiling. The garden is not intended to generate measurable revenue, “just to give back to the community and teach students valuable lessons about giving and growing.”
The main goal of our garden is to give back to the community,” Lon explained, “and to give the DCD students a valuable experience that they would otherwise not have had. Now, they have an understanding of how it works.”

Since its inception, the garden has undergone substantial improvements. “We are light years from where we started with an infertile plot. To go from four jalapenos to our current yield is huge.”

Some of the challenges that the garden project has experienced have included resistance, both human and natural. Lon’s original sights on one plot were scattered, so he had to adapt to the plot he had, which accounted for large expenses in the garden’s startup. This year, he also added over 300 feet of fencing to protect the garden from its voracious neighboring rabbits, which, in the past, have taken much freedom in inviting themselves to a meal.

The Learning Process

“Community Development

The Crookston High School garden has resulted in many positive effects, some unforeseen. “We feed the poor and the needy,” said Lon. “I have been told that we are the only regular fresh vegetable link that the Care and Share has at present. In addition, we’ve seen involvement from the DCD classes and the tech and woodshop classes, and we’ve been receiving positive PR [public relations]. I really haven’t pushed it for PR, but it gets attention anyway. You don’t look for adulation; you just do the right thing. It’s really spreading by word of mouth, which I like to see.”

The garden is being used to positively impact the health of the community by donating fresh produce to the poor and needy and to reduce the negative health benefits of food deprivation. In addition, Lon’s efforts have connected him with community master gardeners, who have helped him improve the garden and shrink the learning curve.

In addition, the garden has supplemented the educational material available at the high school. “Our top-notch kids don’t know this stuff, but our DCD kids do, so maybe there will be a trickle-up effect,” Lon said, hopefully. And, pun intended, the garden project has certainly grown. “It started with me and nothing, and now, it’s a 50x70 plot of land. And the effect it has on the people who need it—how do you measure that?”