Project Description

The Occupational Development Center, which provides vocational rehabilitation to those with disabilities, is using its garden to promote the wellness of its consumers, staff, and the community as a whole by encouraging social and nutritional health and learning. The garden includes many beautiful attractions, including the Memorial Garden, the Sensory Garden, a koi pond, raised vegetable beds, an herb garden, a gazebo, and an arbor.

Logistics

The garden at the Occupational Development Center (ODC) has existed for some time with continuous improvements. In 2006, the Sensory Garden, featuring plants to see, touch, taste, hear, and smell, was begun with funding from grants and foundations. Then, in 2008, an Eagle Scout project added raised beds to the garden as well.

Initially, the garden was planned by a volunteer who raised grants and hired a professional landscaper. Since then, University of Minnesota Extension Educator Tammie Malwitz made plans for vegetable raised beds, and Sue Dupree planned out the herb garden.

After receiving its $500 mini-grant from the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Foundation of Minnesota, the ODC used the money on repairs for the raised beds, new soil, fertilizer, plants, labels, flyers, posters, brochures, hand tools, and stones for the Memorial Garden. In an interview, Sue said she believes $500 was the right amount of money needed for the improvements.

Decision-making in the ODC’s garden is a collaborative effort among Tammie, Sue, Habilitation and Training Center (HTC) instructors and consumers, and volunteer gardeners. These parties typically communicate via email and phone, with each responsible for their own part of the decision-making process.

The ODC provides vocational rehabilitation services for people with disabilities, whether mental, physical, or both. As such, it tailors its garden to meet the needs of its staff and consumers, such as the aforementioned Sensory Garden. In addition, the ODC holds monthly luncheons, where salad from garden lettuce is served. The Leisure Wellness Nutrition Class is allowed to harvest whenever produce is ready for picking, and staff members are welcome to help
The main goal of the ODC Garden is to provide a sensory experience for the ODC consumers and the community in addition to nutrition education and pleasant leisure. The center is very willing to involve the general public at large, including distributing posters and brochures among the community and providing a pleasing area for picnics, gatherings, and even a wedding.

Since the garden’s beginning, improvements have included a koi pond, a sprinkler system, sidewalks, raised beds, and an arbor roofed by a grand network of vines. Some challenges that the ODC has encountered include deer, dry weather, and geese that are apparently in need of some potty-training. In addition, ODC staff have found that the raised beds are not within reach of the sprinkler system and so must be hand-watered, sometimes twice per day. This has sometimes proven to be demanding of staff because the Wellness Class cannot provide all of the work necessary for all upkeep.

As a result of its garden, the ODC is finding that individuals are trying more vegetables in different ways (and, importantly, liking them) and sharing recipes. Interest has grown, and there has been increasing participation. Sue related one story of how she picked some dill for a new consumer to smell, and he realized that dill is what makes pickles smell the way they do. Not only has the garden been a learning process for the staff and planners, but also for the consumers who help with the upkeep and enjoy its bounty.

Community Development

In addition to affecting the eating habits of ODC consumers, staff, and volunteers, the garden reduces the costs associated with luncheons, encourages outdoor exposure among the community and consumers, and provides social opportunities for volunteers. “The garden promotes cooperation among our consumers and gets them to act social. With the garden, they can teach each other and relate to each other, getting to share themselves and their experiences,” explained Sue.

The ODC garden, participants are finding, presents a well-rounded medium for promoting healthy lifestyles in encouraging consumers to build relationships, eat better vegetables and try new vegetables, relate learning to experience, and engage in physical activity by simply getting up and walking around. Also, it has facilitated the continued relationship with Tamie’s class and provided a connection between the community and the beauty of nature that is often too easily forgotten.