

12-1-2004

The Pendleton Community Garden Project—More Than Just Planting Seeds

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Recommended Citation

Voltund, A., Dawson, P., & Corp, M. (2004). The Pendleton Community Garden Project—More Than Just Planting Seeds. *The Journal of Extension*, 42(6), Article 21. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol42/iss6/21>

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The Pendleton Community Garden Project--More Than Just Planting Seeds

Abstract

The Pendleton Community Garden Project is more than just planting seeds. It is about planting ideas, growing skills, and nurturing leadership and self-esteem in participants. Extension Family and Community Development, 4-H, and Agriculture faculty provided leadership in bringing together 22 local agencies to work with at-risk youth and senior volunteers. Thirty-five at-risk youth and over 100 seniors and community volunteers turned a vacant lot into a community garden that supplied fresh produce to local food bank recipients and homebound seniors. Both seniors and youth benefited from this intergenerational partnership, thus strengthening Extension's leadership role in forging partnerships for sustainable communities.

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Introduction

The Pendleton Community Garden Project (PCGP) is more than just planting seeds. It is about planting ideas, growing skills, and nurturing leadership and self-esteem in participants. Umatilla County Extension Family & Community Development, 4-H Youth Development, and Agriculture faculty provided leadership in bringing together 22 local agencies to work with at-risk youth, senior citizens, and community volunteers to turn a vacant lot into a community garden. Established in 2001, the PCGP continues to provide produce to food bank recipients and homebound seniors. Both senior citizens and youth participants have benefited from this intergenerational partnership.

Providing at-risk youth with constructive, positive activities has been a long-term dilemma for rural communities such as Pendleton, Oregon. Many communities lack the amenities to keep youth stimulated and engaged in positive activities.

In 1998 Congress revealed that approximately 75% of youth offenders are high school dropouts lacking basic literacy and life skills, possess little or no job experience, and lack marketable skills. Researchers have suggested that in order to avoid further criminal activity, thus reducing recidivism, more programs should be developed to teach youth life skills.

Also, findings suggest that almost all of these youths will return to a life of crime upon release if not involved with educational programs while incarcerated, (Congressional Findings 1998). In fact, each year's class of high school dropouts will cost the nation approximately \$260 billion in lost earnings and unpreventable taxes during their lifetime (Cohen, 1995). Additionally, youth who are institutionalized in the justice system have a greater likelihood of becoming incarcerated adults. In adulthood, juvenile delinquents are more likely to rely on welfare, become chronically unemployed and turn to alcoholism. (Kazdin, 1992).

Program Purpose

The intent of the PCGP was to provide a positive venue for constructive activities to steer youth away from risky behavior, such as substance abuse, suicide, and sexual activity. A recent study conducted by the Umatilla County Commission on Children and Families found that nearly 27% of local 11th graders sometimes felt hopeless and 18% had considered suicide (Commission on Children & Families, 2002).

The PCGP was designed to help alleviate these problems and engage at-risk youth with experiential, community-action activities. Partnering youth participants with senior adult mentors was included to enhance communication skills, teamwork and self-esteem.

Program Objectives

- Provide educational tool to improve intergenerational relationships.
- Support positive, community-based educational programming for at-risk youth.
- Provide fresh food for food banks and homebound seniors.
- Develop leadership, teamwork, citizenship, community-service, and horticulture skills.

Program Design and Delivery

The PCGP was granted use of a city-owned vacant lot near a local city park. Over 100 volunteers and businesses donated expertise, time, products, and equipment to the PCGP. Several small grants assisted in the purchase of additional supplies.

Under the direction of Extension faculty and Master Gardener volunteers, at-risk youth were able to work in the community garden from seeding to harvest. Through their efforts, food bank recipients and homebound seniors were provided garden produce, resulting in an increase in fresh vegetable consumption and leading to a healthier diet. Participants received educational support addressing gardening techniques, nutrition and health tips utilizing fresh produce, leadership skills and communication techniques. The project used 4-H, Master Gardener, and nutrition education curricula. Additionally, the youth had the opportunity to foster community development, cohesiveness, and intergenerational skills while working at the garden site.

Marketable Skills

The PCGP helped plant self-confidence, community service, and citizenship in the minds of at-risk youth. Youth learned life skills, including decision-making, and the farm-to-table concept. By maintaining daily journals, youth became grounded in their reading, writing, listening, and time-management skills. Involvement of senior citizens as mentors provided a positive intergenerational opportunity.

Evaluation

Evaluation of the PCGP included testimonials by youth participants and quantitative measurable outcomes that recorded pounds of produce delivered to needy families, service group participation, and hours of volunteer service. Also, the evaluation process included an Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved instrument measuring pre- and post- knowledge and skills. This instrument consisted of a five-part Likert type scale and showed significant gains in leadership, communication, and horticulture skills. Results included:

- 35 at-risk youth worked with local seniors and 22 service groups to develop and maintain a community garden.
- 2,400 hours were donated annually to maintain the garden.
- 3,000 pounds of produce were distributed to the needy and homebound seniors.
- Most youth gained skills in leadership, horticulture, and communication techniques.
- Most youth and seniors learned to work together in developing and maintaining a community project.

Anecdotes from their journals included the following.

- "I would like to thank you for giving us the opportunity to be part of the community. Not only did I learn a lot about plants, but I also learned how to give something back to the community."
- "Thank you for allowing us kids to participate in the community garden. I feel this opportunity showed us that if we come together we all can do something successful and feel proud about what we have done."
- "I thought going to the garden was fun because most of the time it required teamwork."

Extension's Commitment

Community leaders and volunteers provide a link for practical leadership, while developing an infrastructure within their community, leading to improved self-sufficiency. The PCGP demonstrates that idea by providing an opportunity for at-risk youth, seniors, and community volunteers to work together on a common project. The PCGP highlights Extension's leadership role in creating advantageous partnerships within communities.

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