

Diabetes: A Family Matter **Community Gardens**

Overview

Getting outdoors is a great way to get active! A good way to do this is to plant some seeds and watch them grow. While many families in Appalachia had small family farms at one time, fewer families have them today. Many still have small garden plots and take pride in the canning of some of their harvest, but many families have never grown a garden. In fact, many young people growing up in the region may know little about gardening or growing fruits and vegetables. In the past, the land was often dotted with fruit trees, trees that produced nut, and wild berries. Although some still remain, many have been destroyed through logging, mining, and development of towns and cities.

Maybe it is time for those living in the Appalachian region to think about returning to some of the old ways. Many of our ancestors gardened out of necessity! Growing your own fruits and vegetables was needed for survival. Today we go to the grocery store and buy things from other places. High costs of food in the marketplace and concerns about what is in it and where it comes from are getting to be greater concerns for all people in this nation. We buy canned or packaged products full of ingredients with names that we cannot even say! Instead of fresh things, we rely on canned goods or frozen ones. People often think or say, "Fresh fruits and vegetables cost too much!" Yet, in order for us to have good nutrition, we need more of these fruits and vegetables in our daily meals.

If you want to be healthy, one of the first things that you need is to eat a healthy diet. For many of us this means we need to increase the number of fruits and vegetables eaten daily. Many young children only think of things like fried potatoes as vegetables. Many young people do not even eat a single piece of fruit a day and some may not even eat any in a week. Many adults never eat green vegetables! Concerns about good health need to include ways to have a more balanced diet.

Today, we hear talk about the environment, recycling, carbon footprints, sustainable communities, and buying local. These are concerns for people that live in the hills, mountains, and valleys of Appalachia as well as the rest of the nation. Growing a garden, canning or preserving food, and bartering systems were good ideas that served our ancestors well. Perhaps some of the "old ways" need to be part of our lives again! Maybe these "old ways" are worth considering now! Growing your own can be less expensive than buying things at the grocery store. Besides, the foods are fresh, tasty, and allow you the benefit of physical activity as you grow and harvest them.

Brief Description:

This activity suggests ideas for ways families in the community can work together and encourage local people to grow at least some of their food. While many families can have a garden at their homes, everyone may not have a plot of land where a large garden can be grown. Many ways to think about gardens exist. Some families might want to learn more about

container gardening and use this as a way to grow some fruits and vegetables. Others might be interested in joining in a local effort and start a community garden. A local church or other community group may want to encourage members to grow gardens in a single place and then share produce with one another. School children can be involved by using a plot of the school property as a way to teach children science, math, and even some local history. Planting of fruit or nut trees in public places can be a way to assure fresh produce for the future. Encouraging local homeowners to plant fruit or nut trees on their property or plant grape vines or berries are ways to plan for the future.

Excess produce also allows opportunities to share with those less fortunate in the community through food pantries and gleaning. A community garden project is an excellent way to improve levels of physical activity and gain access to healthier food items. Both of these things are essential ingredients for good health! A community garden project is a great way to combine physical activity, access to fresh fruits and vegetables, reduced financial costs for healthy foods, a way to meet new people, involve young and old, and enjoy the satisfaction of producing food locally.

Objectives:

1. Increase the availability of fresh grown fruits and vegetables that can be eaten daily by community families.
2. Enable young and old to be physically active together as gardens are created throughout the community.
3. Provide ways for local people to access a broader variety of fresh fruits and vegetables than might be found in local stores.

Participants:

This is a project that anyone and everyone in the community can get involved! Developing community gardens can be encouraged as family initiatives, a local faith-based activity, a project for local non-profit groups, or a community project promoted by local leaders. This is a way for young and old to work together. Neighbors can also find ways to join in the efforts.

A number of excellent resources about gardening can be found in your community. For example, the library, Cooperative Extension Agent, local farmers, and whoever sells farm equipment or seeds may be excellent sources of information. Even if persons have never farmed before they can quickly learn the essentials.

Be sure to get your **local library** involved! They likely already have many books and much information available about all kinds of gardening. The local librarian can also compile a list of resources available at the library that pertain to gardening and preserving food for those in the community to access. The local librarian can also help you find additional information you might need. Also, the library probably has computers that can be used and access to an internet

connection if you do not have it at home. The librarian can help you use search techniques to obtain specific information needed. A list of internet websites can also be created.

Another good partner to get involved with planning local initiatives is your local **Cooperative Extension Agent**. Find out who this person is, share your ideas about a community garden project, and see how they can get involved. They have a wealth of free information about gardening and can be a great resource. In fact, they may even be willing to take a leadership role in helping organize some of the community activities.

You will want to identify what local fruits and vegetables are already being grown. Be sure to gain the expert advice of **local farmers** and others that are already gardening successfully at their homes. Find people in your community that have a family garden and some that do container gardening. These people can be champions in encouraging others. Use the local media and feature stories about local farmers, home gardeners, and the benefits of growing fruits and vegetables. Work with your local newspaper and radio station to find ways to support community garden projects.

Some local people might want to specialize in growing large amounts of certain items and make them available for sale through local grocery stores; this could provide some additional income for a family. If a city is nearby, several people may even want to go together and contract with them to purchase some crops. It is always good to discuss these ventures with potential buyers before planting or harvesting. Roadside stands are still seen throughout the country side of Appalachia and could be a good way to make some profit from the gardening.

You might consider beginning a **local farmer's market** if one does not already exist. Some local people may not be able to have a garden, but might be anxious to buy locally grown foods. By starting small and organizing local efforts. Local gardeners with an abundance of fruits and vegetables can provide ways for others through sales at a local market. This market can also be a good way to teach local people more about healthy lifestyles, gardening, preserving and preparing foods, environmental concerns, and the advantages of growing local.

Several things might be considered by the **local food pantry**. Certainly, the local food pantries could receive and distribute left-over or excess produce to local people in need. The food pantry might even want to work with local farmers and develop a gleaning project where local people can pick the late and unused crops for distribution to those in need. However, the food pantry may even want to set aside a plot of land to farm and invite those that frequent the pantry to participate in a gardening project where they will gain access to fresh vegetables for their families.

The Community Garden Project:

See how many different groups of people you can bring together to create this community campaign. Besides many already mentioned, you may want to involve local physical education

teachers and coaches and home economics teachers from your schools. Establish a planning community that has representation from your local health department, hospital or other health care services, schools, churches, businesses, local leaders, and other non-profit organizations. As you consider ways to approach a Community Garden Project, it is important that you make it fit the needs of your town, city, or county. While individual families can certainly grow a garden, it becomes a community effort when people begin to work together. Later some other ideas are described (see below: Other Activities to Consider). Consider ways to tie a garden project to another event that celebrates the lives of your communities' families.

If you decide to have a Community Garden, it will take some special planning. You may have to consider many of the following things as you make plans:

- Who will serve as a Planning Committee
- Location of the Community Garden Site(s)
- Preparation and Development of the Site(s)
- Media Campaign and Local Champions
- Organization of the Garden
- Insurance and Liability
- Setting up a Gardening Organization
- Organizational Considerations (Bylaws)
- How to Manage Your Community Garden
- Sample Guidelines and Rules
- Application Form
- Troubleshooting
- Potential Problems and Solutions
- Children's Plots
- Gardening Information
- Group Purchase of Seeds and Bedding Plants

It is important that you make this activity one that belongs to your community. No matter what you choose to do, be sure to involve the local media in your efforts. Newspapers, local radio and cable stations can help you spread the word. Do not forget to put information about your event in places like beauty parlors, hair salons, grocery store flyers, laundromats, local gas stations, schools, church bulletins, and other public places where your community visits.

Costs:

Costs for community gardens will largely depend on the availability of garden spots, the amounts to be planted, and the items to be planted. While small plants from nurseries can provide a quick growth start, they can be far more costly than growing things from seeds. Shopping around, community cooperatives, and local experts can likely provide important information about what is needed to start your garden, costs of tools, seeds, plants, and other local resources. Bartering with others or sharing of garden tools may be ways to keep some

costs at a minimum. Again, local expertise can be gained from farmers and the Cooperative Extension Agent.

Activity Duration:

A garden can actually be a full year of activity shared with others in the family, extended family, neighbors, and friends. Planning the garden can begin in the late winter or early spring. Getting the ground ready for planting can be an ongoing activity. Early plantings allow the chance of growing early crops that you can begin to enjoy. Crops planted in late summer can produce vegetables that can be harvested well into the fall. Do not forget that there are also possibilities of indoor plantings as well. Of course, much depends upon the growing zone where you live and your local weather patterns.

Some Benefits of Community Gardens:

- Fresh fruits and vegetables to enjoy in season.
- Foods to make your total diet healthier.
- Extra fruits and vegetables to share with family, friends, neighbors, and others.
- Fresh fruits and vegetables to eat that do not have the preservatives used by commercial companies.
- Great times to get physical activity and share with others as you work together.
- Ways to increase the family income by selling extra produce.
- Increase community pride and a sense of independence.

Other Activities to Consider:

Garden project activities include preparing the soil, planting seeds, maintaining the garden, weeding, and harvesting. Planning a harvest celebration in the late summer or early fall may be a way to bring many family members, neighborhoods, or local community people together. You could combine a harvest celebration with a Health Fair that emphasizes activities related to healthy foods, food preservation and storage, food preparation, and fun physical activities for families. Creating a **Harvest Health Fair** can be a way for community people to work together and include others in the community garden activities. *SUGAR Helpers* can work with health professionals, local farmers, Cooperative Extension Agent, and others to make this a unique fun event that really ties together healthy messages for local people.

Another idea is to tie a **Cultural Heritage** event to the early planting or harvest times. Perhaps you have an interest in promoting a traditional lifestyle and intergenerational activities but also want to raise awareness about healthy lifestyles, diabetes prevention, and diabetes management. In many Appalachian communities, families have roots that link them with many Native American tribes that either currently or in the past inhabited the region. Researching these linkages and sharing some of this history and information about earlier life activities and stories could enrich this festival. Many Appalachian communities also have links to immigrant groups, some from the past and some more recent. Looking at some of this history could help you create a unique **Cultural Heritage Celebration** that is linked to culture and history of the

region tied to ways food was produced and used in the past. The celebration could also investigate more about the gardens of the past and focus on ways people have looked at or been involved with physical activities. Identify local historians and get them involved. This would also be a great project for a local school of university students located in your community.

In many places, **County Fairs** come late in the summer or occur in early fall. You may want to tie a harvest celebration into this event. Be creative and think of some new ways to approach sharing gardening information with people in the community while they attend the county fair. In sharing information with others, it is always a good idea to go to places where they will be naturally congregating. Find some local persons that know about environment, recycling, carbon footprints, sustainable communities, and advantages of buying local. Get them involved to help you not only share the facts about the ways community gardens and local produce can impact the health of local people, but also other more long term effects upon the larger community, state, and nation.

Some Internet Resources

If you are looking for additional information about community garden projects, here are some places to begin getting information. Keep in mind that much more can be learned by using your local resources:

ACenet (Appalachian Center for Economic Networks Growing Our Regional Economy)

<http://www.acenetworks.org/>

ACenet works with many community partners to open opportunities for new specialty food jobs and businesses in Southeast Ohio. ACenet's Food Ventures team provides specialty food businesses market and trend information, access to loan and venture funds, small business and financial planning assistance, food production information and training, links to industry exports, and links to other specialty food businesses within a network of firms.

Active Living by Design (RWJ)

<http://www.activelivingbydesign.org/>

This website is about finding ways for communities to become healthier places. The idea is to find ways to construct cultures in local communities where active living and healthy eating are the goal. Their vision is to create healthy communities where routine physical activity and healthy eating are accessible, easy and affordable to everyone.

American Community Gardening Association <http://www.communitygarden.org/>

Appalachian Garden Exhibit <http://community.berea.edu/galleryv/GardenHome.HTML>

Appalachian School of Holistic Herbalism

<http://www.herbsheal.com/>

The Southeast's oldest herbal studies school, Appalachia School of Holistic Herbalism, offers life enhancing skills to impart deep wellness and vitality.

Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project

<http://www.asapconnections.org/mountainfarmtour.html>

Cooperative Extension (Los Angeles) Community Garden Start-Up Guide

http://celosangeles.ucdavis.edu/garden/articles/startup_guide.html

Growing to Green Program

<http://ourohio.org/index.php?page=growing-green-communities-2>

Gardens of Delight

<http://gardensofdelight.info>

Ohio State University Extension Fact Sheet (Appalachia: Eating in America)

<http://ohioline.osu.edu/hyg-Fact/5000/5252.html>

Final Word:

If your community creates a Community Garden Project where health or diabetes is the focus, please be sure to go to the *Diabetes: A Family Matter* website <www.diabetesfamily.net> and share with others what worked and what did not work. A place on the **Communicate** Section of the website will be available for sharing your ideas. Others will be interested in learning about what you have done and what the outcomes were. If you have a website, please be sure to post the link so that others can take a look.