UF IFAS Extension UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA

AEC617

Developing County Associations for School and Community Gardens[1]

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Introduction

Increasingly, gardeners receive attention for the educational, environmental, health, and social impacts that their projects facilitate within schools and communities (Berezowitz et al., 2015; Blair, 2009; Middle et al., 2014; Poulsen et al., 2014; Zick et al., 2013). Extension plays a vital role in providing technical information to support new and existing gardens. To aid in the diffusion of information across different gardens in a county, a programmatic structure that provides educational outreach and resources to diverse audiences is needed. Garden associations are one tool to address this need. The framework below outlines the approach utilized by a pilot program in Polk County, Florida that provides insights and recommendations for starting and maintaining Extension run garden associations.

Benefits to Establishing a Garden Association

The agents in Polk County recognized the need for school and community gardeners to have access to education in tandem with appropriate, timely, high-quality garden resources. Further, clientele identified networking and peer-to-peer learning opportunities as high priorities in a local needs assessment.

Garden Association Development Framework

The Polk County School and Community Garden Association (PSCGA) was launched in the summer of 2016 by the UF/IFAS Extension and Bok Tower Gardens Partnership School Garden Program and Community Garden Program. The framework was developed using lessons learned from long-term, successful, non-for-profit organizations and Extension programs that serve gardens throughout the United States.

1. Operational Procedures

The structure of the garden association serves as the vehicle for delivering education and resources throughout the county. Gardens apply to be part of the association during two open enrollment periods annually. Applications are accepted in June and December. Accepted gardens do not have to reapply annually, but they must submit updated contact information and administrative documentation each year. Applicants are required to receive a site visit by an Extension agent prior to acceptance into the association. All gardens are required to attend an orientation meeting. As part of the orientation meeting, gardens receive a handbook with logs to collect data and a scale to weigh harvested produce. June applicants attend the September orientation meeting and December applicants attend

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the January orientation meeting. Below are the pieces of documentation that are required in the application packet.

Table 1. Application requirements

Community Gardens	School Gardens
PSCGA Application	PSCGA Application
Landowner Letter of Approval	Principal Letter of Approval on Letterhead
Proof of Liability Insurance	Garden Pictures
Applicable Permits	Site Visit
Garden Pictures	
Site Visit	

2. Garden Association Core Values

A guiding set of principles communicates expectations for participation in the garden association to potential members. These core values reflect the mission of Extension and serve as an oral agreement between the agents and association members. These core values serve as an introduction to the association culture that the agents seek to foster. The agents referenced the core values of Denver Urban Gardens and the Growing Communities Curriculum to develop a set of values that reflects the goals of their garden association (Abi-Nader, Dunnigan, & Markley, 2001; Denver Urban Gardens, 2012).

- We value and support a garden team approach.
- We create connections across communities, such as supporting service and experiential learning opportunities.
- We believe successful gardens are tied to places, not individuals.
- Gardens serve all youth and adults regardless of race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations.
- Gardens reflect community voices and decision-making in every step of a garden project.

3. Supporting a Garden Team

Gardens that are managed by more than one person and have a leadership succession plan are more likely to be sustained long term (Drake & Lawson, 2015). To create the expectation for shared responsibility among garden team members, gardens are required to have a garden team of at least five people. Each garden must identify and define specific garden team roles in their application. Team roles and responsibilities should be specific to the garden's mission, purpose, and organizational structure. For example, a school garden team member's role might include public relations and community outreach. This individual would be responsible for reporting garden updates and events via the school newsletter, school website, social media, school bulletin boards, and attending Parent Teacher Organization meetings. The responsibilities could also include recruiting community members and business partners for garden building events, planting events, and garden work days. A community garden may designate one person to be in charge of internal communications. This person's responsibilities include managing an email listserv of all garden members and disseminating regular garden updates.

4. Training the Team

Garden teams are required to attend three trainings between September and April in order to remain in good standing as a member garden of the association. A calendar of the trainings and event schedule is distributed during orientation. The calendar offers a menu of trainings specific to school and community audiences. Gardens that join the association in January are only required to attend two trainings between January and April. Training content focuses on providing technical horticultural knowledge and garden organizational support. Trainings are rotated geographically throughout the county to encourage attendance. Gardens also host workshops at their sites.

5. Garden Resource Distribution

The success of school and community gardens is also influenced by acquiring appropriate gardening materials, access to high quality materials, and competency in Florida-specific gardening knowledge (Berezowitz et al., 2015; Drake & Lawson, 2015). Extension agents can assist school and community gardens by increasing access to proper crops selected for seasonality and other appropriate garden materials. Two resource giveaway events occur—one in the fall and one in the spring—that correspond with planting dates. Specific materials are included in these giveaways, such as quality transplants, compost, potting soil, and seeds (for crops grown best when directly seeded). Gardens receive a list of the transplant varieties and care descriptions when they pick up their plant material. Grant monies, sponsorships, and vendor donations can be used to acquire these materials to distribute to school and community gardens.

6. Data Collection in the Gardens

For the Extension agents to better tell the story of each and every garden to stakeholders, specific documentation is required from each participating garden. Gardens submit an annual report at the end of each calendar year. Logs are used to collect the following information:

Table 2. Association members' data collection requirements

School Gardens	Community Gardens
Number of students utilizing the garden	Garden member hours worked in the garden
Number of volunteers helping in the garden	Volunteer hours worked in the garden
Teacher hours teaching in the garden	Any events held in the garden
Teacher hours maintaining the garden	Garden team meetings
Final lbs. harvested	Final lbs. harvested
Plant list from pollinator garden	Plant list from pollinator garden
Pollinator garden square footage	Pollinator garden square footage

Conclusion and Implications

Garden associations are a tool that Extension agents can use to deliver comprehensive education and resources to gardeners while creating a collaborative learning environment. Agents can tailor the educational content, resources, structure, and organization of the association to meet the specific needs of the school and community gardeners in their county. Creating a community of gardeners allows peer-to-peer learning to flourish and raises the visibility of participating gardens. New gardens are able to receive one-on-one support from Extension agents through site visits and continued mentorship from other gardeners. Management of the association, such as tracking attendance at trainings and maintaining constant communication, can be time intensive, but the organizational structure of the association allows agents to offer a cohesive program to serve school and community garden clientele.

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