



Five Years in Review: Partnering with Local Garden Centers to Offer Produce Production, Canning, and Cooking Classes

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Many home gardeners in Washington County love to grow a myriad of fruits and vegetables, but have a hard time combating pests, diseases, and invasive weeds. They also struggle with selecting correct cultivars for the Northwest Florida climate and obtaining optimal products to combat insect, weed, and disease problems. Home gardeners also have a keen interest in cooking with and preserving the produce from their gardens. To address these concerns, the University of Florida, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (UF/IFAS) Washington County Extension offered five “Gardening, Cooking and Canning” workshops from 2012–16 to teach home gardeners how to successfully grow and prepare a variety of vegetables in the challenging Florida Panhandle climate. These workshops were held off-site at a local feed and seed store to reach clientele who have never attended Extension programs before and to utilize on-site product availability. To implement this workshop series, cooperation among the Horticulture agent, Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) agent, local nursery, and feed store was necessary. The Horticulture agent developed and implemented curriculum in home fruit and vegetable production and raised bed gardening. This curriculum relied heavily on timing to maximize the growing season while minimizing exposure to pests and disease. Integrated pest management for home vegetable and fruit production as well as nutrient and irrigation management were taught. The FCS agent taught participants how to cook with and preserve produce by setting up a mobile demonstration kitchen. The local feed store

sponsored and promoted the workshops. A local nursery provided a mobile raised bed garden on site to facilitate the hands-on components of the workshops. This demonstration was offered to show attendees how to construct and plan their own raised bed garden. Square-foot gardening, pest management and nutrient management were demonstrated. Seeds, vegetable transplants, pesticides and fertilizer were available for purchase on site to assist workshop participants with obtaining the tools necessary for success. All participants were provided with a vegetable gardening guide to take home and instructions to access UF/IFAS Extension for more information. There were a total of 245 participants in this five-year workshop series. Out of 245 participants, 183 completed post-class surveys. One-hundred and seventy-two (94%) participants indicated they had learned something new about home gardening and produce preparation as a result of these workshops. One-hundred and seventy-five (96%) participants planned to practice at least one concept they had learned in the workshop. These practices included building a raised bed garden, improving a raised bed garden, start gardening/grow vegetables, beginning container gardening, installing a drip irrigation system, using fabric cloth to block weeds or shield crops from frost, using organic methods or integrated pest management, using mulch/mushroom compost, utilizing soil tests, and adding soil amendments. Forty-five (25%) of participants were repeat attendees and indicated they had implemented a practice learned from previous workshops.

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