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Can Community Gardens Weed Out Food Insecurity?

ANTI-HUNGER (02.08.06)

BURLINGTON -- Hunger in Vermont is spreading, with tens of thousands of the state's residents going without food each day, according to anti-hunger advocates. But a group of master gardeners and other green-thumbed activists is pushing a relatively simple solution to food insecurity: more community gardens. Now, a statewide network aims to help nascent community groups sow the seeds for more locally based, collective growing.



Last weekend at Gardener's Supply, about 100 expert gardeners -- representing 54 communities and 15 nonprofit groups in Vermont -- got an enthusiastic pep talk on the transformative powers gardens can have on the lives of people who grow them. The occasion was the first-ever meeting of the Vermont Community Garden Network, an initiative designed to link community gardeners from around the state.

In a slide show presentation, Gardener's Supply President Jim Feinson outlined some of the past award winners of the national "Garden Crusader Project." For example, in an impoverished neighborhood of Chicago, community activist Michael Howard converted a 3-acre abandoned lot littered with 200 tons of trash into the "Eden Placed Nature Center," a locally run garden with fruit trees, vegetables, perennials, a mini wetland and even a small petting zoo for area schoolchildren.

In West Palm Beach, Florida, 79-year-old Frances Coffield started a community garden on the site of a razed drug house. Since its inception two years ago, the garden has fed more than 300 local residents with organically grown fruit and vegetables, and has become a neighborhood meeting place and playground. Coffield claims the garden gate is never locked; even local drug dealers respect and protect it.

In a poverty-stricken neighborhood of New Orleans, Earl Antwine set up "God's Vineyard" Community Garden. About 30 local youths help him raise chickens, ducks, geese and vegetables, and formed their own business franchise called "Saint Thomas Seven Pepper Hot Sauce." The sauce was supposed to be sold through the Gardener's Supply catalogue, until Hurricane Katrina wiped out the group's entire pepper crop last summer. Antwine is now rebuilding his home with the help of the youths, and plans to replant the gardens later this spring.

"If you ever wonder if what you do really matters," Feinson told his fellow gardeners, "I think these photos show you that it does."

The goal of the Vermont Community Garden Network, says event organizer Jim Flint of the nonprofit Friends of Burlington Gardens, is to swap ideas and share resources so that community gardeners can benefit from each other's experience.

When Burlington residents think of a "community garden," Flint explains, they typically think of the seasonal plots rented by local residents who want a place to raise their own flowers or vegetables. Now in its 35th year, Burlington Community Gardens is a highly organized program that uses eight different sites around the city and is coordinated by the Department of Parks and Recreation.

But as Flint explains, the Vermont Community Garden Network embraces a much broader vision of community gardening that includes any local growing initiative that helps children, seniors, people with disabilities, and even prison inmates work and plant together. Vermont is only the fourth state in the country with a statewide network of this kind.

Although the bounty from community gardens has long been a mainstay of people's diets throughout Europe, Africa and Asia, only in recent years has the concept taken root in the United States. Why the growing interest now? Flint believes it's simple economics, combined with the increasing political uncertainties of our times.

"Last year, people were in shock about energy prices and food prices going up and, this year, it's really sunk in," Flint says. "This is the year that, locally, people are really thinking about growing their own food again. This is the year that people are going to be hungry for food they



secretsmile

I really did mean more on that later but not just yet, it's a work in progress like everything else...



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can't afford in the supermarket anymore."

According to the Vermont Campaign to End Childhood Hunger, about 55,000 Vermonters, including 21,000 children, are "food insecure," meaning that their families cannot afford adequate diets, so parents skip meals in order to allow their children to eat. In the last five years, Vermont's rate of the most severe form of hunger -- children going without food -- has more than doubled. Visits to local food pantries have hit record numbers; so has the number of Vermonters using food stamps.

Barbara Richardson of the National Gardening Association in South Burlington points out that community gardens get kids outdoors and away from TV sets and computers, and make their classroom learning more hands-on. Participation in community gardens also been shown to raise test scores and lower teen crime rates -- in fact, one such garden in South Central Los Angeles is credited with cutting the neighborhood crime rate by more than 25 percent. Longer term, community gardens help people develop a connection to their food supply and the natural world around them.

"People who don't have a relationship to nature don't understand it, and they don't support it," Richardson says.

According to Flint, the Vermont Community Garden Network will provide more than just helpful tips for producing plump tomatoes or controlling aphids. The organization has received a couple of grants totaling more than \$6000 to help promote new gardens at schools, nursing homes and community centers. A recently acquired third award of \$25,000 will enable the Network to help 20 community groups purchase items such as bulletin boards, fences, topsoil and hoses. Flint says all this will be a big step toward "getting people back to the garden."

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