

Urban Agriculture & Community Gardens

Highlights of the direct and indirect benefits for gardeners and partner organizations

ommunity gardens have been ■ a fixture of Milwaukee County Extension since rental plots were first made available at the Milwaukee County Park grounds in 1972. Over the past five decades, Milwaukee County Extension's Urban Agriculture programming has grown to include 11 garden sites, which encompass 80 acres, and directly serves over 750 households annually.

Milwaukee County Extension provides a variety of garden-based education for youth, hobby gardeners, veterans, and others, which is described in Appendix A. It also plays an important role in managing and maintaining nearly a dozen community gardens across the county (for more detail, refer to Appendix B).

To better understand the impacts of its garden plot rental program, Milwaukee County Extension partnered with the Extension Community Food Systems program and an evaluation specialist from the Extension Community Development Institute to conduct focus groups and interviews with a cross section of gardeners from three distinct garden sites in the Milwaukee County Extension garden network— Firefly Ridge, 6th Street and Howard and Kohl Farm—in fall 2021 (figure 1). This report summarizes the key themes that emerged from these focus groups and interviews (refer to Appendix C for discussion of methods). Milwaukee County Extension's role in garden oversight and maintenance by illustrating that consistent access to safe, affordable garden plots yields a myriad of benefits for participating gardeners as well as partner organizations that incorporate these community spaces into with the benefits documented in the research on community gardens.



FIGURE 1. Gardeners from three sites in the Milwaukee County Extension garden network participated in focus groups and interviews for this report.

Our findings underscore the value of their programming. They are consistent





garden sites



garden plots



acres in production



participating households



microfarms in operation



35%+ non-white gardeners



gardeners who donate vegetables



2,403 produce recipients



\$62,000 plot fee revenue





Zinnias are ready for market in Nhia's garden plot at Kohl Farm.

Key findings

Through focus groups and interviews gardeners identified major individualand community-level outcomes that could be attributed to their experiences at Extension-operated community gardens. These include:

- Physical and dietary benefits,
- Mental health benefits,
- Strengthened social networks,
- Pathways to food entrepreneurship,
- Strengthened understanding of culture and tradition,
- Organizational partnerships,
- Enhanced food access and food security, and an
- Enhanced understanding of ecology and appreciation for greenspace.



Raudel proudly shares his pepper crop at Firefly Ridge.

Physical, dietary & mental health benefits

The majority of the gardeners we spoke with were growing either as a way to eat well on a limited income or as a way to have culturally important ingredients.

These gardeners noted that in the absence of the garden space and their own labor, they would not be able to eat as healthily as they do. Remarks such as "Growing food for my family saves money" and "I don't usually need to go to the store to buy vegetables" were common, especially among Hmong growers who also grow products for market.

Gardeners also underscored the importance of the gardens for their mental health. This theme cut across demographic characteristics. As one gardener noted, "We live in ... an inner city so it's nice to get away from all of our noises and gunshots and you just feel serenity being [at the garden], you know, not having to worry about much of anything [...] and it doesn't cost much ... You can just enjoy yourselves out there." The gardens also provide therapeutic spaces for specific audiences, such as veterans who use the gardens for both production and as a meeting space: "The garden is a way to get the veterans away from the city. They get away from those mental pressures. It's a way for people to relax from their mental state and recover from PTSD. The veterans from the Vet Center come out to the garden for group meetings."

Strengthened social networks

Community gardens also build social networks. Gardeners detailed how they built and strengthened personal and professional relationships as a result of community gardening. Gardeners variously described the gardens as a "community" a "knowledge exchange and support system" and "a family." For some of the gardeners, these social networks were associated with opportunities for employment or entrepreneurship.

We probably talk with more neighbors when they are stopping by for some veggies than we do the whole rest of the year."



Milwaukee (ounty Extension community gardener

For others, the social networks were associated with a deepened understanding of other cultures. Participants discussed how their interaction with other gardeners and Extension staff led to new friendships, a greater sense of connection to the community, and overall community improvement. In fact, the theme of strengthened social networks relates to nearly all of the other gardener-identified outcomes in our study and represents a significant impact of the gardens.

Pathways to entrepreneurship

In one focus group, gardeners outlined the ways that the garden has provided them with the physical space and technical knowledge they need to grow vegetables and harvest honey for market. One participant noted that their involvement in the community garden enabled them to tap into social networks that led to new business connections and marketing opportunities for the products they grew. Several of the hobby gardeners said they had a greater appreciation for farmers as a result of their interactions with market gardeners and their own direct experiences with food production. Others mentioned that their hobby gardening experiences helped them realize that they had the knowledge and skills to grow at larger scale for profit.

In at least one instance, involvement in a community garden contributed to non-food related entrepreneurship. Inspired by the beauty of the gardens, one focus group participant has been exploring using the space for incomesupplementing photography and flower arranging classes: "I'm a photographer. So last weekend, I offered some family photo sessions in the flowers so you can get some family photos, get to take a jar of flowers, and experience the garden [...] Next year, I'd like to do more on-farm workshops and have flower arranging workshops and things like that."

These examples of emergent entrepreneurship highlight an opportunity for Extension and partners to develop and adapt educational programs that use the gardens as classrooms and incubators. Market gardeners reported that, in the absence of Extension's affordable garden spaces, they would have been less likely to start or expand their enterprises and their market gardens would be less profitable. Affordable rental options and conveniently located garden spaces were essential to the success of these small-scale producers.

Enhanced understanding of culture and tradition

Gardeners identified multiple ways in which the gardens helped them gain a deeper appreciation for their own culture or heritage or enabled them to share and learn about other cultures and traditions. They discussed how the community garden spaces gave them opportunities to grow foods that have cultural significance or cannot be easily found in local grocery stores or markets. As one gardener noted: "A lot of the foods that [Hmong gardeners] grow are foods that aren't usually found here ... [That is] one of the big benefits that the garden provides because they aren't able to find these products in the supermarkets here." For example, Hmong gardeners described several types of peppers, herbs, and squash that they grew that wouldn't otherwise be available to them.

Several Native American gardeners affiliated with the community garden near the Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center discussed their decision to garden as leading to strengthened connections with elders and an increased understanding of their own identity and culture. Others also found that the opportunity to rent a plot of land and grow their own food deepened their connections with other generations of family members. Several participants described gardening with their children as an activity that contributed to greater family cohesion.

My grandma taught me how to save zinnia seeds and that memory has always lasted with me. And now I'm getting to be able to save my own seeds and share those seeds with other families to get them inspired to grow."





A sampling of produce collected from the Native Wellness Garden at 6th Street & Howard.

Organizational partnerships

Gardeners discussed how the community gardens were also an important resource for other community organizations. In one instance, gardeners described how a garden was associated with educational programs at the Native American Food Sovereignty Alliance and Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center. Other groups discussed strong connections between the gardens and food pantries or other community service providers.

We probably put out 1,000 pounds of veggies. Most of that was tomatoes ... about 200 pounds of squash ... 50 pounds of green, yellow beans."



For example, gardeners at one garden forged a partnership with the Ronald McDonald House, which distributes their flower donations to families with children are receiving medical treatment at local hospitals. Another garden used donations from a Lowe's hardware store to improve a garden plot dedicated to food pantry donations.



A Groundwork volunteer picks up produce at the Firefly Ridge donation shed.



Youth members of the Running Rebels community organization learn about ecology and gardening at Firefly Ridge.

Increased knowledge and appreciation of ecology

The community gardens broadened participants' knowledge and appreciation of the environment and ecology. This theme surfaced in all three focus groups. Participants volunteered that gardening helped them understand the natural world in new ways. Observing nature, in turn, contributed to their continued interest in gardening and success as gardeners. Whether it was simply becoming more aware of the animals (and pests!) in the area or gaining a greater understanding of the ecology that supports food production, the gardeners appreciated this benefit of being in a natural classroom. Moreover, these connections with the seasons and natural environment extended beyond gardening. Multiple gardeners described how greater awareness of ecology and increased knowledge of food production sparked their interest in larger community and policy concerns such as climate change and the need for more open space in urban areas.

Improved access to fresh, healthy, affordable & culturally relevant foods

Participants described how they were able to save money as a result of growing their own food. The cost savings associated with household food production was an important benefit of gardening for nearly all participants in this evaluation study and was an important factor related to their decision to rent an Extension garden plot. As one gardener explained: "I'm very happy that we have this garden because I use this garden to supply foods for my family ... because I'm from a low-income background. And so, it's just very helpful all around." In an interview, another gardener stated, "It's really important to grow our own food. Groceries at the store are too expensive." Interviews with gardeners at Kohl Farm also underscored the importance of having access to garden plots in close proximity to the city. The generally affordable plot rental rates and convenient location of the gardens were integral to the success and satisfaction of household and market gardeners alike.



Kohl Farm is home to an apiary and provides hands-on experience for participants of Milwaukee County Extension beekeeping workshops.



Volunteers and urban apiculture enthusiasts inspect hives at a Milwaukee County Extension beekeeping workshop.

The cost savings associated with household food production was an important benefit of gardening for nearly all participants in this evaluation study and was an important factor related to their decision to rent an Extension garden plot.

Extension resources and management bolster the overall "quality" of community gardens

In all three focus groups, participants discussed the importance of wellmanaged community gardens in maintaining safe, supportive, and productive urban agricultural spaces. Participants indicated that Extension gardens are special because of the knowledgeable and friendly staff who support the operations and ensure the availability of tools, irrigation, and educational programs. Participants mentioned that there is usually clear communication between Extension and gardeners regarding rules and regulations. They also stated that Extension gardens "feel safe."

Participants highlighted the following as important attributes of a successful community garden:

- Clear communication about garden rules, plot registration, and events
- Convenient location
- Access to water
- Garden management provide annual tilling and other general maintenance
- Affordability

Additionally, gardeners noted that the general presence of Extension staff at the gardens is critical for creating a sense of safety at garden sites.



Rudy Kluz, agricultural equipment operator at Milwaukee County Extension, tills garden rental plots at Kohl Farm.

The benefits of Milwaukee County Extension-operated community gardens extend well beyond individuals who participate in Extension's traditional content-driven educational programs.

Conclusion

Our conversations with gardeners make it clear that Milwaukee County Extension's garden spaces are important community assets. Notably, as the examples here demonstrate, the benefits of Milwaukee County Extension-operated community gardens extend well beyond individuals who participate in Extension's traditional content-driven educational programs, such as beekeeping workshops. The vast majority of the participants in our evaluation study engaged with Extension largely as participants of the plot rental program, and yet their stories show that individual use of garden spaces is associated with rippled effects that benefit other individuals, neighborhoods, nonprofit organizations and beyond.

In sum, these gardens are places that promote physical, mental, and nutritional health. For many gardeners, community gardens reduce household food expenses, offer a sense of self sufficiency, and create opportunities to grow and access culturally important crops. The gardens also promote social connections – people make new friends in these spaces, share ideas, and learn from one another. These connections bolster other outcomes, and for some, the social connections lead to other benefits such as new business opportunities, knowledge of growing techniques that yield better crops, and expanded knowledge of other cultures.

Garden spaces also provide many growers with a heightened sense of understanding and respect for the natural world. For some, gardening is also an opportunity to "give back" to the community by volunteering their time to share their knowledge with others or donating food to neighbors and food pantries. Regardless of an individual's reasons for gardening or the benefits accrued from their gardening experience, it is clear that community gardeners develop close ties to these shared spaces and participation in community gardens appears to yield a sense of fulfillment.

Our findings are significant both because they underscore the direct and indirect value Milwaukee County Extension provides through community garden oversight and maintenance and they highlight opportunities for future investment and expansion.

Opportunities: Looking ahead

The future success of the Milwaukee County Extension Urban Agriculture and Community Gardens program will require continued investment by state, county, and local partners. Additional support for this program will enable Milwaukee County Extension to build on its current strengths while continuing to expand access to diverse audiences.

While gardeners were largely satisfied with garden management and operations, they saw opportunities for expanded programming and resource development. Opportunities for future expansion and improvement include:

- Providing additional static resources at community gardens for rental plot users, including multilingual demonstration boards and factsheets on vegetable production and pest management.
- Increasing educational programming opportunities and informal technical assistance for gardeners, including offerings in Spanish and Hmong.
- Investing in season extension infrastructure to enable gardeners to grow more shoulder season and winter crops as well as crops that require a longer growing season than our region allows.
- Investing in additional staffing to support and strengthen partnerships with local organizations interested in using garden sites and/or collaborating with Extension programs.
- Increasing internal capacity to foster cross-disciplinary collaboration and educational opportunities that use the gardens as classrooms for programming on topics such as youth development, nutritional education, healthy eating and active living, and community development.



Extension programming at Milwaukee County community gardens

Intersections of the Urban Agriculture program

While the Urban Agriculture program delivers valuable outcomes for participants and partners, it also serves as a hub for other Extension Milwaukee County programming. The Urban Agriculture program uniquely collaborates with other program areas in Milwaukee County by providing and maintaining growing spaces, as well as facilitating relationships that lead to sustained partnerships with community-based organizations. As we look to grow our collaboration and deepen our impact across Milwaukee County, the Urban Agriculture program gives us opportunities for activating spaces and engaging communities that Extension colleagues in Milwaukee County colleagues may not otherwise have access to.

Current Extension crossprogram collaboration Positive Youth Development

- The Growing Connections program (funded by a 5-year CYFAR grant and engaging two community-based partner agencies) engages young people in growing food and leadership development in garden spaces managed by the Urban Agriculture program. This would not be possible without the backbone of the support and guidance of colleagues in the Urban Agriculture program to prepare and maintain the garden spaces, provide valuable resources and connections, and expertise to develop the infrastructure that supports youth and community engagement.
- 4-H programs receive produce and seedlings that are used by clubs and partner organizations.

Horticulture

- worked with Urban Agriculture on several projects including designing and maintaining accessible and therapeutic gardens for the programs for people with disabilities at both Grant Park and Underwood Parkway; Additionally, they work in community gardens that specialize in growing food for donation to local food distribution sites.
- Gardeners have benefited from the gardening classes and Plant Health Advising Help Desk offered by the horticulture program.

FoodWise

- The Urban Agriculture program guided the vision and construction of the Native Wellness Garden in collaboration with the Gerald L. Ignace Indian Health Center, which now serves as a central part of the ongoing FoodWlse programming offered through the center.
- FoodWlse educators have offered classes in the gardens, which allowed them to reach new audiences.
- In the future, one of our Healthy
 Community Coordinators is looking to
 collaborate with the Urban Agriculture
 program to connect EBT/QUEST card
 users to affordable and accessible
 gardens and related resources (e.g.,
 seedlings).



Jan Alba, garden rental coordinator at Milwaukee County Extension, prepares to host a therapeutic horticulture workshop at the Wil-O-Way Grant Park greenhouse.

An operations overview of Milwaukee County Extension's Urban Agriculture program

This appendix highlights the logistical, administrative and maintenance tasks required to operate Milwaukee County Extension's Urban Agriculture program. The program is staffed by four individuals who work in close coordination with other County Extension colleagues to provide garden-related educational programming for a range of audiences.

Since the previous Urban Agriculture Educator/Program Director went on medical leave at the beginning of 2021, the program has had to turn down all new requests for partnerships and services, including revenue-generating activities, due to lack of staff capacity. The continued success of this program will require refilling the position and rebuilding key relationships with gardeners, service providers, and organizational partners. Gardeners continue to be very motivated to engage with Extension as indicated by strong turn-outs and high levels of enthusiasm at the evaluation focus groups and interviews.

Staff roles

Urban Agriculture Educator/ Program Director

- Maintain all current Urban Agriculture programs, including Garden Plot Rental program, the Beekeeping for Certification program, youth garden programs, and other opportunities as they emerge.
- Work with Agricultural Equipment
 Operator to maintain 11 community
 garden sites, including seasonal
 plowing, tilling, water access,
 and related equipment repairs,
 maintenance and replacement.

- Develop and maintain partnerships with community-based organizations, including the Gerald L. Ignace Health Center (Native Wellness Garden), the Milwaukee Veterans Affairs Medical Center (Veterans Healing Garden), youth-serving agencies; pursue new and emerging opportunities for collaboration and engagement in the gardens.
- Develop and implement educational programs for youth and adults in garden sites.
- Oversee the garden rental process.
- Provide gardening expertise to gardeners as needed related to research-based vegetable gardening practices, weed identification, and other issues as they arise. and weed Identification, with eradication of noxious weeds as they are found.
- Develop large-scale garden design and oversee all operations within gardens.
- Serve as support for the garden rental registration process and primary liaison for responding to gardener questions and issues as they arise.
- Design, develop and implement new garden sites in Milwaukee County.
- Conduct needs assessment and set priorities for new educational outreach programs.
- Organize and recruit volunteers for community gardens and garden programs in Milwaukee County. Assist in the preparation, maintenance, and improvement of the existing Extension community gardens.
- Assist in conflict resolution and management of gardeners; support a collaborative community of shared knowledge and practices.

- Plan, develop and implement cover crop/green-manure based soil fertility plan for three community gardens.
- Collaborate with colleagues to develop and implement activities and classes for youth and adult gardeners based on the needs and desires of the community.
- Collaborate on grant writing and reporting activities.
- Develop and implement garden and plant related programs for youth and adults.
- Assist in the evaluation of volunteer outcomes.
- Manage all reporting to meet all grant, program and state requirements.

Garden Rental Coordinator

- Manage on-site and off-site garden operations, serve as liaison with gardeners to understand needs and issues in the gardens and propose maintenance and improvements.
- Update and enforce all policies and procedures for garden rental process and activities in gardens. Receive and address all complaints and issues in the gardens.
- Oversee garden rental process.
- Support Agricultural Equipment
 Operator in preparing and maintaining all garden sites.
- Maintain and improve (when possible/ necessary) garden rental database and record keeping.
- Support garden rental registrar and serve as back up whenever needed.
- Serve as a liaison to Extension colleagues and the garden rental community.



Plot renewals at the Milwaukee County Extension Garden Rental Desk.

- Provide expertise and guidance related to general vegetable gardening and weed plant identification.
- Manage interpersonal issues with gardeners and with garden rental staff.
- Prepare and maintain plant materials for educational programs and outreach efforts.
- Support Agricultural Equipment
 Operator with equipment repair and replacement, including acquiring parts, services and conducting research for viable equipment repairs and upgrades.
- Serve as assistant to Agricultural Equipment Operator when needed, including mowing grass, measuring and staking garden plots and creating new informational signs as needed.



Rudy Kluz tills rental plots at Milwaukee County Extension community gardens.

Agricultural Equipment Operator

- Prepares 80 acres of community garden space for the garden season at 11 garden sites (includes tilling, general carpentry, fence repair, grass mowing, hoop house repair, shed repair, cutting dead trees and brush, staking plots, installing signage, gravel road repair, tractor maintenance, tractor trailer towing from garden to garden, and water line repair), and navigate all other issues related to gardens as they arise.
- Develops and implements a timeline to prepare all garden sites, ensuring that all gardeners have access to rented garden plots to maximize growing season. Follows a logical progression of garden preparation and maintenance in the spring and fall annually.
- Tills and plows John Royal Sunshine Garden, Amaranth Bakery community garden site and Groundwork 26th & Clybourn gardens.
- Closes down all garden sites in good condition to ensure that the sites can be prepared in a timely manner the following season, including mowing, chopping vegetation, and plowing or tilling as necessary.
- Maintains water systems, purges water pipes at the end of the growing season.
- Takes water well samples that are sent to UW-Stevens Point Water Labs for results to make certain well water meets standards for vegetable production. Water well quality reports are sent to the Milwaukee County Parks Director.
- Prepares and closes down partner sites when necessary (i.e., Waukesha County garden plots).
- Performs regular maintenance on farming equipment and repairs the farming equipment when faced with breakdowns and troubleshoots equipment malfunction when possible.

- Acts as the primary builder in new garden development and directs onsite construction activities.
- Cares for and maintains vegetable plants in early spring at hoop houses, including watering, transplanting. transporting and distributing to community partners and Extension program sites.
- Assists other Extension colleagues with transport and planting of vegetable materials for food pantry projects.
- Cares for and maintains food pantry plots and transport vegetables for donation to partner pantries when needed.
- Troubleshoots and/or reports any problems and gardener concerns to the appropriate Extension colleagues, either Garden Rental Coordinator or Garden Program Educator for exploration and resolution.

Administrative Assistant (part-time)

- Receives and records all garden rental registration renewals.
- Manages, receives, and records all new garden rentals.
- Prepares all accounts receivable reports; prepares checks for deposit
- Archives all garden registration communications and forms.
- Manages all queries and communication related to the garden rental program.
- Data entry for all garden rentals in the database; runs reports as necessary.
- Manages all in-person transactions for garden rentals.
- Assists in editing of communications and marketing materials.
- Assists with general office duties as needed.

Summary of methods

An overview of the Ripple Effects Mapping process

Ripple Effects Mapping (REM) is a participatory method that is often used to understand how programs affect individuals and communities who are involved. The process includes four core "ingredients" (Chazdon et al. 2017, p. 5):

- 1. Appreciative inquiry,
- 2. A participatory approach,
- 3. Interactive group interviewing and reflection, and
- 4. Mind mapping.

REM is an especially powerful methodology for understanding how programmatic interventions (inputs) are directly and indirectly associated with changes in knowledge and behavior at multiple levels. REM was selected as the primary method for this evaluation as a way of understanding which

community garden outcomes could be attributed to Extension's community gardens management and educational programming. This method was also selected for its strength in engaging underserved audiences in dialogue about programming and elevating voices that often go unheard in traditional data collection processes. Finally, REM was selected as a way of identifying emergent and under-researched program outcomes that can inform future program planning.

Participants

Individuals renting plots at Extensionoperated community gardens were invited to participate in the Ripple Effects Mapping process. In total, 20 gardeners from 3 Extension-operated gardens participated in an REM event. Participant demographics are described in table 1.

TABLE 1. Ripple Effects Mapping participant demographics.

Race	
American Indian or Alaska Native	3
Asian or Asian American	2
Black	1
Black or African American	1
Prefer not to answer	1
White	12
Ethnicity	
Hispanic or Latino	1
N/A	1
Not Hispanic	17
Prefer not to answer	1
Age	
18–59	14
60 plus	6
Gender	
Female	14
Male	6
Grand total	20

We want the good life.
We want wealth and
happiness too. I want
to be able to provide
for my family. Growing
and selling flowers
is how I do that."

– Hmong gardener at Kohl Farm



Nhia grows fresh flowers for market at Kohl Farm.



Dahlias and sunflowers are among many varieties that fill Nhia's garden plot.



Gardeners with plots in Milwaukee County Extension community gardens participate in a Ripple Effect Mapping event.

to stop gardening here because I am getting older with health issues, but I do it anyway. I have a desire to see things grow. I love seeing that and I want to keep experiencing it for as long as I can."

- Hmong gardener at Kohl Farm

Background and methods

Kohl Farm provides educational programming and rental garden plots in the City of Milwaukee. This particular farm serves a racially and culturally diverse mix of individuals, including a large number of Hmong family gardeners and commercial growers. In order to ensure that these diverse voices were included in our dataset, we conducted interviews with Hmong gardeners at Kohl Farm on October 13, 2021. All interviews used simultaneous interpretation and followed a semi-structured set of interview questions. In total, we completed twelve interviews. It is notable, that the themes that emerged from semi-structured interviews with individuals mirror the outcomes identified during Ripple Effects Mapping events with growers from 3 different Extension-operated Milwaukee community gardens.

Results

We reviewed interview notes to identify common themes. The gardeners we spoke with described the benefits associated with rental plot gardening and they discussed ways to improve the overall garden operation at Kohl Farm. The benefits described in these one-onone interviews mirror the benefits and outcomes that were discussed in Ripple Effects Mapping conversations that are outlined in this report. They include:

- Kohl Farm Community Garden benefits physical and mental health.
- Gardening promotes healthy diets and lifestyles (e.g., access to pesticide-free, fresh and traditional foods).
- Rental plot vegetable production allows people to eat healthy on a budget.
- Gardening at Kohl Farm fostered important social connections.
- Kohl Farm provides an affordable, accessible, space for individuals growing for market.

References

Chazdon, Scott, Mary Emery, Debra Hansen, Lorie Higgins, and Rebecca Sero. 2017. "A Field Guide to Ripple Effects Mapping." University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing. Retrieved from the University of Minnesota Digital Conservancy, https://hdl.handle. net/11299/190639.



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