



Our Mission

The Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Tom Vilsack, established the People's Garden on USDA property in Washington, DC, to promote the consumption and cultivation of sustainable, safe, and nutritious food while protecting and preserving the landscapes where food is produced. The garden is to be educational and engaging, demonstrating environmental responsibility and an awareness of where our food comes from. Secretary Vilsack challenged all USDA agencies to lead by example and establish similar gardens, either at their headquarters or off-site, which supports healthier landscapes and communities.

Food, Nutrition, and Consumer Services (FNCS), headquartered in Alexandria, VA, welcomed Secretary Vilsack's challenge and is extending the initiative to include outreach, education, and community service through community gardens. Our goal is to empower consumers with farm and food knowledge and promote health and well-being in alliance with the public and our non-profit and government partners.

Our Work

To kick our efforts off, we are cultivating a People's Garden at FNCS' Headquarters at Park Office Center in Alexandria. The fruits of our labor will be donated to a local food bank and grown organically with sustainable practices, such as partnering symbiotic plants to nurture the soil and each other. We hope to

The Many Challenges of Establishing Community Gardens at an Office Park

by Jezra Thompson

lead by example and demonstrate that projects like these can have a large impact through small contributions.

We have been fortunate in many ways, including having the support of the USDA and working in an environment that encourages creative projects that focus on healthy eating and lifestyles. We know that not all community garden projects will be as fortunately situated, but we hope our project can highlight some challenges and teach us and the public some lessons learned that can be applied to different community gardens.

The Garden Site

We have gained access to two 8' x 8' x 3' planter boxes across the street from our office building, on land that is not owned by us. In our urban environment, these planter boxes transform our lofty ideals of open space into a container garden situated in a pedestrian cul-de-sac with park benches. We anticipate that people will spend more time in this under-used space as the garden grows.

At the moment, there are small, decorative plants bordering a medium-sized tree in each of the containers. We have worked with our building management to have these plants relocated to another site on the property's grounds. Once they have been removed, we will begin tilling the earth, mixing in organic compost and sowing seasonal food plants.

We have chosen to plant only two crops each season, to allow for larger yields that could be more easily integrated into a meal prepared by one of

the food banks. Our first crop will be this fall and will feature carrots and onions. We will be planting spinach and kale during the winter; lettuce and beets in the spring; and tomatoes and cucumbers in the summer. We will plant organic seeds and starts with organic compost and avoid chemical pesticides. We will carefully tend what little land we have with the notion that we will be growing healthy produce with the abundance afforded by healthful gardening methods.

Throughout these gardening activities, we will educate FNCS and other federal employees housed in and around Park Office Center on sustainable food systems and nutrition. Such activities as potlucks and other nutritionally conscious events will highlight the garden's crops. As a result, we hope that these activities will encourage FNCS employees to participate in gardening activities outside of the People's Garden and within their own communities.

Meeting Challenges

We lease our offices, so we have faced some land use and access issues that other community gardeners may confront while gardening away from home or in rented space. Many questions regarding aesthetics and tidy gardening practices were raised. There was also concern about the maintenance of the containers and the surrounding area. We have tried to address these concerns holistically and responsibly. In doing so, we have researched edible plants that also have pleasing ornamental qualities. While organizing the management of the garden, we are carefully considering how the garden materials and equipment can be stored and how we will handle watering and cleanup, to care for the property in a respectful manner.

FNCS has about 900 employees at Park Office Center. Working with such a large group of potential gardeners also poses a challenge. We want to ascertain commitment and support for this project, while giving everyone a chance to contribute. To ensure that everyone who expresses interest will have an opportunity to participate, we will use a volunteer list to develop a rotating planting, care, and harvesting schedule. Volunteer procedures will ensure

that the garden is well-maintained and continues to be neat, pest-free, and aesthetically appealing.

Lessons Learned

It has been very beneficial for us to establish a good working relationship with our landowners. By addressing their concerns up front, we have been able to collaborate and to respond to them in a timely manner. We have also learned that it works best to make gardening decisions democratically. This guaranteed employee buy-in at the project's inception, which was critical in getting enough support and enthusiasm to jump-start this project and will help maintain its future.

FNCS employees expressed enthusiasm about getting involved and participated in planting surveys that asked them to rank the types of food plants they would like to grow on-site, as well as an opportunity to list their favorite local food banks to which they would like the produce to be donated. These surveys, which were created with help from FNS's Office of Strategic Initiatives, Partnerships, and Outreach (OSIPO), also will help us organize the employee volunteer schedules.

Follow Our Progress

You can follow our progress and related projects, such as gardening workshops, cooking demonstrations, and community projects, at our FNCS People's Garden flickr site: www.flickr.com/photos/usdafoodandnutrition/sets/72157622020584962/.

You can also follow the main People's Garden site on USDA property on the National Mall in Washington, DC, on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/peoples-garden>.

For more information and to stay connected, email us at: PeoplesGarden@fns.usda.gov.

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