

A Library-Led Urban Gardening Project for Youth

Objectives and Rationale:

Neighborhoods, schools, apartment buildings, and Town Halls are all jumping on the urban gardening and local food bandwagon, and it's time for libraries to join the movement. Developing an urban garden with a group of interested, socially-minded teens, in partnership with local environmental and community gardening organizations, is a creative way to promote the library as a community space, an organization engaged with grassroots issues, and a source of valuable information about food politics, energy sustainability, and plain-old gardening tips. Planning, building, and fostering an urban garden is an active, concrete way for teens to engage sustainability issues and feel empowered to make positive change in their community. It provides an educational opportunity for teens to learn about the local food movement and the reasons behind it, to learn practical skills in an informal manner, drawing on the knowledge of community volunteers, and to raise their awareness of healthy ways to grow food without damaging the earth. It encourages teens to feel a sense of ownership in their library and community, and to use library resources as a basis from which to think critically about social issues. The programme can also serve as a jumping-off point for developing a teen environmentalist group at the library, from which to explore other issues and learn further ways of making positive, active societal change.



Programme Description:

A group of teens work with community volunteer gardeners and library staff to plan, build, plant, tend, and harvest a vegetable and herb garden near the library building. A patch of unused, sunny lawn may be used, or (for greater ease) a garden bed that is already built up on the property. (If no green space is available, consider adapting the program for container garden, or borrowing space from an established, nearby, community garden.) Over the course of the project, the teens participate in hands-on workshops with community volunteers on topics such as soil health, pesticide alternatives, crop rotation, seasonal produce, water pollution,



food security, etc. The teens also work with librarians and community partners to host a Local Food Awareness Day near the end of the season.

The programme showcases the library as a centre for information about sustainability and social activism, and about practical, hands-on guidance for young gardeners. Displays of books on workshop topics such as planting tips, pesticide alternatives, water pollution, food security, and, of course, seasonal and local produce, can complement programme activities.

The Urban Garden Project is ideally suited for older teens (aged 15-18 years), who can take real responsibility for the project, and can grasp the social and political implications of the activity, but it can also be adapted to form a great educational opportunity for younger teens.



Practical Considerations:

It is important to do your research, and take time to prepare for a project of this scope. Check out suggested gardening timelines and practical tips at the **American Community Garden Association's** *Guidelines for launching a successful community garden in your neighbourhood* (<http://www.communitygarden.org/learn/starting-a-community-garden.php>), **Food Share's** *Community Gardening Month-by-Month* (http://www.foodshare.net/toolbox_month07.htm), and the **Halifax Garden Network's** *10 Steps to Starting a Community Garden* and *Month-by-Month Guide to Starting a Community Garden* (<http://www.halifaxgardennetwork.com/>). The project can be conducted at relatively low cost, especially if sponsors, such as gardening businesses and hardware stores, can be found to donate tools and seed. Remember to factor in costs such as tools, seeds, fertilizer/soil, publicity, and gifts for volunteers.

The Teen Urban Garden relies heavily on community partners, so it is essential that they be onboard for the project. Community volunteer gardeners are needed to lead workshops and guide teens through the gardening process. The organizations with which these volunteers are affiliated may also be able to supply some of the tools and fertilizer needed for the garden. Partnerships with guest speakers and presenters for the Local Food Awareness Day are also important. Local organic farmers, organizations such as WWOOF and Food Not Bombs, and chapters of environmentalist



groups may be good places to look for potential speakers.

Programme Evaluation:

The Teen Urban Garden project produces certain tangible results that can be measured readily, such as the number of teen participants, the regularity of their participation, whether they bring friends along, the problems and successes of partnering with community volunteers, and the attendance figures for the Local Food Awareness Day. But it is also important to evaluate teen responses to the project through a survey or focus group session near the end of the programme. Survey and focus group sessions should be partly based on the Search Institute's Developmental Assets, or another system of measurement, as these give external criteria by which to measure success. It is crucial, too, to communicate with the teen participants throughout the project, listen to their concerns, and try to address any problems as they arise.

Happy Gardening!

Helpful Resources:

The Edible Schoolyard. 2008. 20 March 2009. <http://www.edibleschoolyard.org/garden>

Every Lawn a Garden. 2007. 20 March 2009. <http://www.everylawnagarden.ca/>

The Food Project. "Blast Youth Initiatives." Web page. 2007. 20 March 2009.
<http://www.thefoodproject.org/blast/internal1.asp?ID=369>

FoodShare. "Community Gardening Program." Web page. 2009. 20 March 2009.
<http://www.foodshare.net/garden02.htm>

Garden Mosaics. "Action Projects: Green Teen Community Garden." Web page. 2009.
20 March 2009.
<http://www.gardenmosaics.cornell.edu/pgs/data/actionread.aspx?garden=78>

Halifax Garden Network. 2009. 20 March 2009. <http://www.halifaxgardennetwork.com/>

Portland Parks and Recreation. "Hit the Dirt! Teen Gardening Program." Web page.
2009. 20 March 2009.
<http://www.portlandonline.com/PARKS/index.cfm?c=39846&a=199705>

WWOOF Canada. 2009. 20 March 2009. <http://www.woof.ca/>

