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The Food Bank for Westchester, NY: A Holistic Food Growing Program

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By Doug Decandia, Food Growing Project Coordinator

The Food Growing Program is a project initiated by the Food Bank for Westchester, of Westchester County, NY. The Food Bank is the supply and support center for over 200 hunger relief agencies (soup kitchens, shelters, food pantries, etc.) throughout the county. These agencies that directly

distribute food and supplies to individuals and families experiencing hunger.

The goal of the Food Growing Program is to contribute to the supply of healthy food and education for county residents. To meet this goal, the program has two main objectives:

1. a production operation – to grow healthy food for local distribution, free of charge
2. vocational program – for students, inmates, and community volunteers

The land on which food is grown is located on five gardens throughout the county:

- Leake & Watts – school and residential support center for teenagers – Yonkers, NY
- Edenwald – school for teenagers – Pleasantville, NY
- Woodfield Cottage – school and juvenile correction facility – Valhalla, NY
- Westchester County Penitentiary – penitentiary – Valhalla, NY
- Westchester Land Trust – private residence – Bedford Hills, NY

The students (from the schools), inmates (from the penitentiary), and volunteers (from the community) are the source of labor at each garden—providing the labor for seed starting, transplanting, harvesting, field work, and soil care. The Food Growing Program Coordinator oversees, manages, and provides education for the program. While working in the gardens and engaging in discussion, lessons are observed, felt, and taught, an experiential and hands on education for the students, inmates, and volunteers.

In total, there are 2.5 acres in production during the growing season. Each season, approximately 20-25 main food crops are grown, with each of the gardens “specializing” in about five of these food crops (which

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are familial or culturally similar). These food crop groups are rotated between gardens each season.

The 2011 season was the first time the Food Growing Program gardens were organized and operated as one functioning food production (in years past, each garden was overseen as an individual space by a different person). This season was also the first that the Food Growing Program Coordinator was a full-time position—allowing for one person to provide oversight, management, and education to all of the gardens and to all of the students. The total harvest of the 2011 season contributed to over 18,000 individual servings of organically-produced and locally-grown vegetables for county residents experiencing hunger.

In reflection of this first season, strengths and weaknesses of the Food Growing Program include:

Strengths

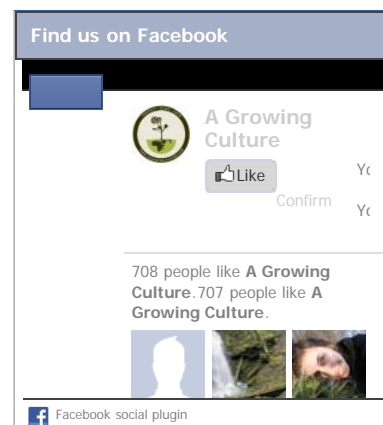
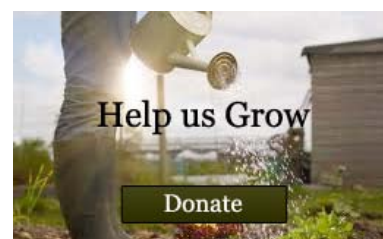
- Non-profit backing (the Food Bank) provides financial support for the program
- One full-time paid employee acts as Food Growing Program Coordinator
- Supply of organically-produced and locally-grown produce
- Experiential education provided to incarcerated adults and youth with emotional issues
- Cooperative and mutually beneficial relationships between Food Growing Program and Garden Sites
- Food Bank gets growing space and food harvested
- Garden Sites get education
- Food is not sold, but instead brought directly to Food Bank where it is distributed throughout the county—no marketing involved in distribution
- Other Food Bank employees help with grant writing, site relationships, and volunteer coordination
- Non-profit recognition of Food Bank allows donations (seeds, tools, etc.) and tax-deduction purchases

Weaknesses

- Unpredictable supply of labor—we do not know how many students will be able to work each day
- Garden sites are located in geographically different places throughout the county—a lot of driving
- Each garden is physically, chemically, and biologically unique—but adds to complexity of coordinator's experience (a good thing)

This program does have potential to be replicated in other areas of the county or world. The most important characteristics of this program that allow it to function as it does are:

- An agriculturally-experienced coordinator
- Full-time employment of coordinator
- Including salary, health benefits, etc.
- Funding for program budget (in this case, through the Food Bank)
- Mutually beneficial relationship between the growing source (in this case, the Food Bank) and the site (the garden sites)
- Sources of labor (in this case, the students, inmates, and volunteers)
- Ability to distribute harvest (in this case, through the Food Bank)
- Warehouse, storage, transportation, etc.
- People/sources to distribute food to (in this case, the hunger-relief agencies)
- Greenhouse space
- To start plants and to grow food in
- Storage space
-



For food (until distribution), supplies, and tools

A program like the Food Growing Program has the ability to act as an asset for the funder and other parties involved. The ability to contribute to the funder and other parties can sustain and promote the program and allow its influence and contributions to continue successfully.

The Food Growing Program is a source of locally-grown, nutritious food for individuals experiencing hunger. It is also a source of education for adults and young adults to learn, through experience, about hard work, responsibility, science, and agriculture. It allows the coordinator to engage with their hands, their mind, and their spirit in the practice of an ecological agriculture, and to "make a living" from it. The Food Growing Program is a source of sustenance through the food, education, and life experience it provides.



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