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## Using A Community Garden Program to Promote Positive Youth Development

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## Using A Community Garden Program to Promote Positive Youth Development

*Melanie Dabb*

### Abstract

*Wayne County 4-H used grant funding to develop a community garden to encourage youth in agriculture and promote positive youth development in the county. Positive outcomes of the garden include increased sense of community belonging, knowledge of local agriculture, and increased consumption of fruits and vegetables.*

### Introduction

Gardening provides many benefits for youth, such as facilitating physical activity, promoting healthier eating habits, building confidence, relieving stress, helping to develop analytical abilities, and improving focus and memory (Flavin, 2016). The Wayne County 4-H program operated a community garden in the past with limited success. However, in 2020, Wayne County 4-H received grant funding from the Whole Kids Foundation to revive an existing community garden. Encouraging youth in farming and agriculture projects has been identified as a priority by county commissioners in Wayne County (Narine, 2021).

Wayne County is a rural county located in central eastern Utah. The county seat, Loa, is approximately 46 miles from Richfield, which is the nearest city with a big box or chain store and where many residents of Wayne County shop. Wayne County is geographically isolated and has a population of 2,711 spread out over a large area of 2,466 square miles. The poverty rate is 11.2% according to the Census Bureau (2021). The USDA has designated Wayne County as a food desert with limited access to grocery stores and other resources.

### Response and Target Audience

The revived Wayne County community garden is an approximately 72 by 40-foot space located on the grounds of the Wayne County courthouse. It has three raised beds, two in-ground perennial beds, a cold-frame hoop house, a compost area, and a hen house for a local 4-H poultry project. Seeds and plants were donated by local businesses and residents. A 4-H summer intern of USU Extension initially built raised beds, in-ground beds, covered the hoop-house, and oversaw planting. Following, grant funds were used to provide Master Gardener Volunteer Training to a volunteer 4-H club leader to lead the garden project. The volunteer started a 4-H Cloverbud (5-8-year-old youth) garden club. The garden club met once a week, and youth and families who participated in the garden kept the produce harvested in the garden. The target audience for the community garden program was youth living in Wayne County and their families. On average, five (5) adults and 15 youth worked in the garden weekly. The youth who participated were primarily 5-8 years old.

### Outcomes and Impact

Youth in the 4-H garden club were able to grow radishes in the Wayne County community garden. Youth shared their learning experiences with facilitators, many were excited to nurture the plants and looked forward to taking the harvested radishes home to eat. Many youth were interested in learning more about the produce and were proud of their efforts. Some invited their families to the garden to show off what they did in the garden. Youth were also eager to learn more about sprouting seeds and root systems. Youth experiences in the community garden led to increased interest in local agriculture and motivation to learn more about agricultural sciences.

In total, volunteers and youth provided 291 volunteer hours in the garden between May and August of 2021. Youth learned basic plant science, including what plants and seeds need to grow and thrive, useful insects, and the role of pollinators. Math skills were also incorporated into teaching since students learned about plant spacing and making the most of out a limited garden space. Students are also learned life skills such as delayed gratification by waiting for seeds to sprout, and creative problem solving and resilience when a project was not successful the first time.

Parents of the youth who participated in the Wayne County community garden also shared their experiences in a short evaluation survey after their children completed the summer garden season ( $N = 4$ ). When asked, all parents stated they plan to continue working in the community garden. One parent stated “It was so fun to see the kids’ excitement when things would start to grow and when they could eat the food they had harvested.” As part of the experience, each child was able to take a pumpkin home for Halloween. Table 1 shows the results of the parent garden survey done in October 2021. Overall, parents indicated their children had increased knowledge of the sources of fruits and vegetables, and had an increased understanding of the importance of eating healthy food. Parents also believed their youth ate more fruits and vegetables because of the community garden, and were willing to try new foods.

*Table 1: Adults’ Responses to Evaluation Questions about the Community Garden*

Question	Frequencies (% , $n = 4$ )			
	<i>Definitely Yes</i>	<i>Probably Yes</i>	<i>Probably No</i>	<i>Definitely No</i>
As a result of working in the community garden do you feel your child(ren) have an increased knowledge of where fruit and vegetables come from?	100	0	0	0
As a result of working in the community garden do you feel your child(ren) have an increased understanding on the importance of eating healthy food?	75	25	0	0
As a result of working in the community garden do you feel your child(ren) are eating more fruits and vegetables?	50	50	0	0
As a result of working in the community garden do you feel your child(ren) are more willing to try new foods?	50	50	0	0

After working in the community garden do you and your children have an increased sense of community and belonging?	75	25	0	0
Do you feel you spend less money at the grocery store while working in the community garden?	50	25	25	0
Do you feel your family has more access to fresh produce working in the community garden?	75	25	0	0

### Public Value and Next Steps

Evaluation results indicated youth and adults of the Wayne County Community garden had positive experiences during their participation in the community gardens. Positive outcomes include increased sense of community belonging, knowledge of local agriculture, consumption of fruits and vegetables, and willingness to try new foods. The next step for the community garden is to create a partnership with the USU Create Better Health program and the Wayne County Food Pantry to develop a system to donate produce from the garden to the local food pantry. The Wayne County community garden represents a significant step towards community partnerships, youth agricultural literacy, and new localized food systems.

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