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Urban Homestead Education for Backyard Gardeners in Utah

Andree’ Walker Bravo

Abstract

The Utah State University Extension Urban Homestead Expo caters to individuals and families interested in maximizing their self-sufficiency while living in an urban setting. The Urban Homestead Expo is designed to provide content to those wanting more than basic gardening classes, but who may not identify as producers. Workshops include backyard chickens, fruit production, water-wise irrigation, beekeeping, vegetable-integrated pest management, water harvesting, and other sustainability-related topics.

Introduction & Problem

Utah State University (USU) Extension offers classes for traditional home gardeners, as well as commercial fruit and vegetable producers, farmers, and ranchers (Smith, 2023). However, there was an opportunity to serve a target audience who wants to do more than grow a traditional home garden but may not be interested in advanced agricultural production topics. These backyard urban homesteaders want to incorporate more sustainability and urban agriculture into their small lot and urban home environment. According to Oberholtzer et al., (2014), urban agriculture refers to the growing of plants and raising of animals within and around cities.

Farming in the city presents many challenges, some of which are common to all types of farming, and others unique to the urban setting. Urban farmers face significant knowledge gaps and institutional barriers (Pearson et al., 2010). Although a growing number of Extension programs are allocating resources to urban agriculture (Reynolds, 2011; Surls et al., 2014), there is a dearth of research and literature regarding urban agriculture. This is exacerbated by the fact that most Extension professionals are trained to support rural farming and are often located physically distant from urban centers (Pearson et al., 2010). As such, USU Extension in Salt Lake County worked with Extension faculty and the Jordan Valley Conservation Garden Park to develop the Urban Homestead Expo to fill this gap.

A non-formal focus group of USU employees provided suggestions and guidance and an informal needs assessment was conducted via social media where the target audience of urban gardeners suggested and ranked session topics. These efforts resulted in a one-day event that offered multiple break-out sessions and classes ranging from organic gardening, backyard chickens, lye soap making, irrigation, and small fruits. This event maintained more than 300 in-person attendees for the first two years, and an increase in attendees each year from 2020 to 2023 as it moved to a free, online format.

Response & Target Audience

In 2016, a USU faculty member joined a Facebook group called “Utah Backyard Homesteaders”. This group consisted of people interested in incorporating sustainability practices into their urban yards and small gardens. There were many discussion posts and requests for advice. However,
the faculty member noticed a trend of misinformation and a lack of research-based information in the group (e.g., improper use of chemicals in the landscape, poor animal-rearing practices, poor plant choices). Conversations with other USU Extension faculty confirmed the trend of misinformation within this online community. USU Extension caters to home gardeners through its Master Gardener and horticulture programs, as well as small farmers and producers through its agricultural services. However, a large audience of over 10,000 members in the urban homesteaders’ group was not served via Extension. The Facebook group has grown to over 24,900 members as of July 2023.

The Urban Homestead Expo was developed and implemented in 2018. The 2018 and 2019, Urban Homestead Expo events were held at the Jordan Valley Water Conservation Garden Park. The event offered a mix of formal class lecture events and information provided at booths over one day. Common lecture and booth topics include:

- Beginning Beekeeping
- Backyard Chickens
- Rethinking Lawn
- Waterwise Vegetable Gardening
- Soil Health
- Basic Insect Identification
- Backyard Livestock
- Homemade Sausage and Cured Meats
- Vegetable Integrated Pest Management
- Basics of Home Canning
- Adaptive Gardening
- Small Fruits and Berries
- Herb Gardening
- Lye Soap Making
- Cooking with Herbs
- Permaculture
- Rain Barrels
- Raising Meat Rabbits
- Pruning
- Companion Planting
- Root Cellars
- Greenhouses
- Backyard Butchering
- Proper Chemical Use in the Landscape
- Organic Gardening
- Composting
- Water Wise Irrigation

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the Urban Homestead Expo shifted to a free online event. Participants gained access to 15-20 classes throughout the day. With this change, event organizers saw an increase in attendance and were able to offer more classes.
The Urban Homestead Expo is advertised through the Backyard Homestead Facebook Group, the USU Extension statewide calendar (https://extension.usu.edu/calendar), the local county Master Gardener groups, and the USU Garden Experts Facebook page. The event primarily attracts participants from the State of Utah, but with the transition to the online format, out-of-state individuals attended. Figure 1 provides a summary of attendance to the Urban Homestead Expo. Participation declined in 2022, and this may be attributed to online burnout or “zoom fatigue” as the numbers have increased again in 2023.

**Figure 1:** Urban Homestead Expo Attendance.

**Outcomes & Impact**

From 2018 to 2023, the Urban Homestead Expo had a total of 4,905 individuals, fostering a community committed to urban homesteading. A retrospective evaluation was conducted with participants from 2020 to 2023, yielding valuable insights into the event's effectiveness and influence. During the 2020 Expo, 80% of the 721 respondents shared a strong commitment to implementing the instructors' recommendations in their urban homesteads. The quality of presentations during 2020 received an average rating of 4.03 out of 5, reflecting the high quality of the material shared. Furthermore, results showed an increase in participants’ knowledge, moving from an initial average of 2.29 (i.e., some knowledge) before the event to 3.90 (i.e., good knowledge) after the event.

In 2021, 87% of the 1,085 respondents expressed an improvement in their understanding of the presented topics. Additionally, 77% were determined to apply the recommendations provided by instructors. In 2022, out of 132 respondents to the evaluation survey, 96% were keen on trying out a recommendation made by the instructors. Results also showed that 75% of these participants learned practical solutions to their problems and the same percentage would advocate for the Urban Homestead Expo among their friends or colleagues.

The most recent Expo in 2023 maintained a positive trend. About 89% of the 113 respondents to the evaluation survey stated they planned to implement the instructors' recommendations.
Furthermore, 78% noted their understanding of the presented topics was "slightly better or much better", indicating the continued educational impact of the Expo. Consolidated evaluations from the three years demonstrate an increase in participants' knowledge and an intent to incorporate the best practices shared in the presentations.

Qualitative data were also gathered from the participants through open-ended survey questions. When asked about the specific recommendations they intended to implement, participants shared a diverse array of commitments. These ranged from infrastructural modifications such as the installation of driplines in new garden layouts, and utilization of various row covers and agrofabrics, to the adoption of holistic strategies like permaculture design and soil conservation.

Other participants planned to expand their urban homesteading scope by integrating meat rabbits, improving their pullets' transition to outdoor environments, and introducing herb gardens. In addition, a focus on early pest detection through enhanced insect identification was evident. Regarding participant advocacy for the Urban Homestead Expo, the results were moderately favorable. Of the 113 respondents in 2023, 67% indicated a positive recommendation to a friend, while 23% remained passive, and a minor 10% expressed non-endorsement. Moreover, an encouraging 80% of respondents (n = 110) from 2023 demonstrated a continued commitment to the Urban Homestead Expo, indicating their intent to attend the 2024 edition.

**Public Value & Next Steps**

Evaluation results of the Urban Homestead Expo underscore the positive benefit of enhancing participants' knowledge and inspiring them to incorporate shared best practices. Moreover, participant feedback demonstrates the public value of the Expo, highlighting a keen interest in its continuation. In response to the observed decrease in online attendance in 2022, USU Extension in Salt Lake County has created a complementary in-person series for 2023, thereby addressing the diverse needs of the Utah Urban Homesteader community. Held at the Wheeler Historic Farm in Murray, Utah, these monthly sessions, which began in February 2023, mirror the Expo's topical breadth and depth. By December 2023, this series will have delivered 16 educational classes offering a blend of theoretical and practical insights into urban homesteading.

Preliminary participation for the in-person series ranged from 8 to 50 people as of July. A comprehensive evaluation will be conducted after the series, providing a robust assessment of its impact and effectiveness on urban agriculture. Looking forward, USU Extension is committed to sustaining and enriching these endeavors by tailoring activities to effectively address the evolving needs of Utah's urban homesteading population.

**References**


Utah Backyard Homesteading (n.d.), in *Facebook [Group Page]*. https://www.facebook.com/groups/UtahBackyardHomesteading