

Growing Wholesome Neighborhoods
By Melissa Kastner

A community garden is like a pot of chicken soup. It involves the work and care necessary for making a stronger community while incorporating all the important ingredients needed for a healthier society. Just like the



nourishing soup, a community garden could be cultivated by any one and anywhere. Groups of people within the community tend to them and they can be located in an urban, suburban, or rural area and grow flowers, plants or vegetables. They can be arranged as community plots, or as many individual plots. Like the traditional broth, these gardens have been in practice for many years and have served many purposes.

Evidence from archaeological digs show that some type of shared gardens existed in most cities. In America, movements to provide gardening space in urban areas have existed since the 1890's. Their purpose was to promote food, exercise, and community involvement and to improve the environment of cities and towns. In America, such gardens have been found in vacant-lots, schoolyards, and in parks and businesses. Depression-era relief, victory, and community gardens gained popularity and developed out of necessity as a result of the social and economic change of the country. The government also ran programs that encouraged gardening. The hearty benefits of community gardens have continued their prevalence in today's society.

Such benefits ultimately improve the quality of life of those involved and promote a healthy and stable community. Socially speaking, community gardens facilitate neighborhood and community development and stimulate social interactions, similar to the way in which a good pot of chicken soup can bring together a family. These gardens help develop the identity and spirit of a community. They bring people together from varied backgrounds, including race, age, culture and social class that help create a healthy society and act as centers for community organizing. Studies have shown that the amount of crime in a neighborhood decreases as green space increases. According to *Gardeners in Community Development*, "Community gardening is recognized by the many police departments as an effective community crime prevention strategy."

While beautifying the neighborhood and promoting good relations among neighbors, community gardens also act as educational devices. They teach the youth where food comes from, basic business principals, the importance of community, job and life skills and issues pertaining to environmental stability. Such education can be compared to a mother teaching her child how to measure and incorporate the equally important ingredients that compose chicken soup. These gardens also serve as a healthy and inexpensive way for the youth to



interact with each other in a socially meaningful and physically productive way while bringing them closer to nature. There are other environmental benefits of community gardens too.

Gardens hold environmental importance by preserving green space and conserving resources. They help keep lakes, rivers and ground water clean by filtering rainwater. They restore oxygen to the air and help reduce air pollution. Just as chicken soup returns nutrients to your body, these gardens recycle organic material including large amounts of tree trimmings, leaves and grass clippings back into the soil. They also reduce the heat given off from streets and parking lots. In addition to being a benefit to the environment, community gardens also help improve the health and income of the neighborhood.

The health benefits of community gardens go hand-in-hand with the economic benefits by producing nutritious foods and encouraging self-reliance. They reduce family food budgets while creating income opportunities and economic development. Families and individuals who do not own their own land are afforded the opportunity to produce food. These gardens provide low-income families and individuals access to foods rich in nutrients that may be unavailable otherwise. Just as a large pot of chicken soup can feed many, thousands of pounds of fresh produce are donated to food pantries and involve the community in the process of providing food and alleviating hunger. The development and maintenance of such garden space is actually less expensive than parkland and have been shown to increase property values in the immediate neighborhood where they are

located. In addition to their social and environmental economic importance, community gardens create opportunities for recreation and exercise.

It has been shown that community gardeners and their children have healthier diets than non-gardening families. The consumption of locally produced foods reduces asthma rates because children are able to consume reasonable

amounts of local pollen resulting in the development of immunities. Community gardens also afford exposure to green space that "...reduces stress and

increases a sense of well being and belonging." Eating more fresh local produce is also one of the best ways to address childhood lead poisoning. Horticulture therapy is another advantage in such a community. The Clinton Community Garden in New York City is an example of how these gardens can serve the community in many ways.

The Clinton Community Garden is one of the largest American community gardens. It offers a large variety of activities for children and parents. This garden includes potluck suppers, picnics with string quartets, gardening seminars, herbal workshops, harvest picnics, art festivals, weddings and birthday parties. In addition tour groups, horticultural organizations and neighborhood schools visit the garden for recreational purposes.

It is evident from this example how gardens reward and enlighten the



community. Their benefits far exceed the hard work and labor that go into growing and maintaining these gardens. They provide many of the essential nutrients that strengthen and satisfy a

community. Just as chicken soup is good for the soul, community gardens ultimately support the individual and the neighborhood through a combination of love, enrichment and care.

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