

Letting Your Garden Grow

*Guardian Angels Catholic Church
Oakdale, Minnesota*

A number of faith communities across the country are lucky to own the land occupied by their parishes or worship centers. Guardian Angels Catholic Church in Oakdale, Minnesota, has taken full advantage of its unused land by converting nearly a half-acre of open space into a fully functioning garden.

History

At a church retreat 14 years ago, members were asked to draw a vision of the church's future. Two of those members, Barb Prokop and Maggie Lindberg, drew gardens. Putting their heads together, they came up with the idea for the church garden on unused church land. They approached church leaders with their plan, pitched as an outreach/justice pursuit project because all produce would be donated to area food shelves. This idea was accepted by the parish and what was once a large grassy space was converted to a large garden. Fourteen years later, these women continue to make this vision a reality.

The motivation

The Guardian Angels Community Garden provides an abundance of fruit and vegetables for local food shelves. But to make this project successful requires an abundance of volunteers who can care for and manage the garden. Volunteer Theresa Watschke likes that they can provide something for people who do not have easy access to fresh and healthy food. "A lot of people in this world need help, and with the garden we can do this," says Theresa. Two high school freshmen also help with the garden. Victor Lugg likes that "it helps the parish community get involved with the church while also feeding the less fortunate." Classmate Joe Warner agrees, and feels that it is "really incredible to do something like this." Volunteer Mary Mahoney puts it simply: "It's an opportunity to play in the dirt and give back!"

The project

The Guardian Angels Community Garden is not just any garden. It is meticulously planned and cared for, thanks to the expertise of Barb and Maggie, along with countless volunteers. The garden is split into twelve 3-foot-by-4-foot plots with enough space to move a wheelbarrow or

even a small tractor in between. The fruit and vegetables are rotated each year to a different plot, adding to soil health and keeping insects and microbes guessing. Three of the 12 plots are kept out of production and are instead planted with buckwheat. The buckwheat is then tilled into the soil and used as green manure, enhancing soil fertility. A wooden frame that can be unassembled, moved and reconstructed from year to year surrounds the compost pile. The garden is managed with organic values in mind. Barb and Maggie strongly believe organic growing is the best management for the land and healthiest for the food produced.



At the start of this project, local food shelves were interviewed to determine if they could handle the distribution of fresh food. Three food shelves immediately complied; another food shelf was added a few years later. The garden was then planted to accommodate the number of food shelf clients and the food shelf's storage capacity. Spring, summer and fall crops are planted, including everything from beans and broccoli to potatoes and peppers. In all, 28 different fruits and vegetables have been grown.

As with any project of this scale, volunteers make it happen. They harvest produce on Tuesday and Saturday mornings and on Thursday evenings. Volunteers then deliver the fresh fruit and vegetables to the food shelves after harvest on Tuesdays and Saturdays, and on Friday mornings. In all, about 70 volunteers have signed on to help. Ten of those are drivers making the deliveries. Barb hopes to have 24 volunteers a week to ensure maximum efficiency.

During the planting season, nearly 100 preschool students, 10 at a time, help plant potatoes. The preschool children also help with the potato harvest. Barb and Maggie keep meticulous records of every crop and yearly harvest totals by weight. On average, about 10,000 pounds of produce are collected each season. In 2007, nearly 4,000 pounds of watermelon and squash were harvested. According to the volunteers, a watermelon is considered a prize at the food shelves!

Lessons learned

All church members are invited to work in the garden. “In an effort to be Christ to one another, the Guardian Angels Garden Committee invites you to join us in growing fresh produce for those who are hungry.” According to Barb, “We knew food shelves didn’t have nutritious options so we planned this to fill that void for part of a year. We wanted to place very nutritious food in the hands of those who needed it the most, including the elderly, children, folks stressed by low or no income, or people struggling to meet their basic needs.” The volunteers have learned a lot about themselves and the spirit of the church, thanks to this project.

Many of the volunteers have some connection to farming by either growing up on a farm or having farmers in their family. This garden gives them the opportunity to work with the land again and help those less fortunate in the process. Theresa Watschke sees the vast benefits. “It gives me a chance to garden—and for a good cause. The food shelf clients really appreciate it, because if you don’t have much money, you probably don’t buy very much healthy food.”

“This garden is grown to share the bounty with those in need,” says Barb. What started as two similar visions, drawn on paper 14 years ago, has developed into a wonderful project that should be around for a long time to come.

Web resource

Guardian Angels Catholic Church:
www.guardian-angels.org/fia/outreach/

