Notes from the Field

Empowering the Palouse: Growing Food, Educating, and Cultivating Self-Reliance

By Alex Arroyo

The mission of the Whitman Community Action Center in Pullman, WA is to empower the people and communities of Whitman County to be self-sustaining and self-reliant.

The Whitman Community Action Center provides a number of services to low-income and food insecure residents of Whitman County, including housing and utility assistance, family support, and a Food Bank that serves over 6000 individuals each year.

The Community Action Center strives to promote balanced nutrition and to provide as much fresh food as possible to their clients. The Center’s ‘Food Bank Gardens’ program utilizes a network of gardens around Pullman where food is grown for the Food Bank, including community garden plots, home gardens, garden plots at a local church, several school gardens where students learn about local food systems, as well as a hydroponic system right at the food bank.

As a volunteer, Sue Guyett was the driving force for cultivating the Center’s community relationships. By being observant and actively talking about her ideas and the needs of the food bank, she cultivated numerous community partnerships with organizations across Pullman. Through these relationships she was able to develop initiatives dedicated to promoting fresh food, expanding what is available to clients and the community.

In one example, “a casual conversation” led to Sue learning that the community garden at Koppel Farms in Pullman donated 4 - 20x20 foot plots to local non-profits. She then contacted the plot manager, who was excited about the Community Action Center’s program.

“The first year we received 2 plots. The Koppel board was impressed with our production and plot maintenance; by the 3rd year we were awarded all 4 plots.” Sue noted how “good stewardship of other people's property is paramount to continued partnerships.”

In another example, Sue noticed one day that the St. James Episcopal Church, which serves the needy of Pullman in many ways, had a sizable garden that wasn't fully used. She asked if the food bank garden could use some of the space.

Community Partnerships

- Identify community groups that have a mission of feeding the hungry, growing fresh food, and education - and collaborate.
- Be observant and creative!
- Talk to anyone and everyone!
- Share your enthusiasm and passion when introducing your program and mission.

Education about Food and Nutrition

- Work with schools to develop curriculum that meets academic needs while also exposing students to nutrition education, gardening, and many other skills.
- Gardening – in any form – can serve as a powerful medium for education and inspiration.
“Like at Koppel, we demonstrated good stewardship and production, and by year 3, they gave us the entire garden and additional land adjacent to the garden that wasn't being used. It doubled our growing space.”

During another casual conversation, Sue “learned of a teacher that was passionate about the environment, gardens, and healthy food.” So, she introduced herself. “We set up a time for me to come in and teach her Builder’s Club how to make hydroponic beds for lettuce production.”

“The students had a blast using tools to construct their science project. They built 4 beds and used different fertilization methods to see how the lettuce responded: organic fertilizer in one, commercial fertilizer in another, one with no calcium, and no magnesium in the last one. I saw the teacher a few months later. She said the experiment was wonderful and had only one issue... The students couldn't stop eating their experiment.”

A hydroponic gardening system was also installed at the Community Action Center site to serve both as a practical resource for growing fresh food year-round and as an educational tool to teach clients and volunteers the fundamentals of plant biology and gardening.

Joe Astorino, the Center’s director, explained how the initial motivation for the hydroponics “was to fill gaps in late-fall and winter when we weren’t getting much produce. It also is a great resource for teaching about gardening because so many variables that affect plants outdoors are controlled for.” Joe and volunteers have “tried to integrate it with our nutrition education and cooking demos. Showing the importance of fresh produce, leafy greens, and those sorts of things, to good nutrition. People are very interested by the process and it seems to bring about a lot of conversations about what it means to grow food indoors, impacts on self-reliance and sustainability.”

In reflecting on their many successes, Sue notes that “establishing relationships with people in our community was key to launching a successful program. Identifying groups and individuals who have a passion for feeding the hungry, growing fresh food, and education helped to make connections for donated land and water as well as volunteers.”

Joe describes how the Center’s strategies for engaging community members are deeply embedded in achieving their mission of supporting community around Whitman County. “We really try to engage people in a mutually-rewarding way so that they have a good experience and would enjoy coming back. If they have a good experience they seem more likely to be engaged and interested in learning about the Center’s other programs.”

For more information about the Whitman Community Action Center, visit their website: [http://www.cacwhitman.com/](http://www.cacwhitman.com/)

For more information about starting or developing your farm-to-food bank initiative, please email [growingconnections@northwestharvest.org](mailto:growingconnections@northwestharvest.org), or contact Laura Titzer at 206.923.7423