

COMMUNITY HARVEST GARDEN:

Growing produce for charity, with love and organic methods

Abridged, updated transcript of a talk given by Dawn Graham in a Community UU Church service, August 2010

The Community Harvest Garden is a unique outreach program from Community Unitarian Universalist Church of Plano. It's located in the meadow just east of the church, and when it's not hosting a lively Fourth of July church picnic, it quietly grows vegetables for people in need throughout Collin County.

It started in 2005, when church member and environmental advocate Deb Bliss recognized an opportunity to put some "unusable" land-by-the-parking-lot to work, helping to enrich both our community and our earth. So she started a focus group at our church, and together, they rented a plot at the City of Plano's Community Garden to get a feel for what managing a similar program would entail.

In 2007 the Community Harvest Gardeners broke ground. Local businesses contributed discounted supplies, and volunteers hand-framed and filled 14 raised beds, which the garden group eagerly planted. Since then, the number of plots and gardeners has almost doubled. And there's plenty of room to expand.

To join the group, gardeners pay a \$35 annual fee for one 4-by-16-foot plot, on-site water, and the use of community-owned tools. You just add seeds! In addition to tending our individual plots, which must be 100 percent organic, gardeners volunteer two hours a month to maintain and improve the common areas, which include herb beds, a blackberry bramble, compost bins and even an orchard.

The "Community" in "Community Harvest Garden" applies both to our small collection of gardeners and to our group's outreach to the larger community. First, we are truly a community-based group. Gardeners are not required to be members of our congregation, and about a third of the current group are neighbors whose only connection to our church is the community garden.

Our members range from curious novices to master gardeners, and there is a wonderful atmosphere of shared adventure as everyone learns from the experiments, mistakes and successes of everyone else. So the garden is a place not only to contribute, but, quite literally, to grow.

For our outreach mission, each week a different volunteer goes through the entire Community Harvest Garden, picks about half of what's ripe in each plot, and delivers it to a local charity. Our donations are often hefty, and the recipients always enthusiastic.

Personally, I find that gardening, and sharing the fruits of that effort, can be profoundly spiritual. The fact that I can put these tiny, hard chunks of stuff into the ground and have living, nourishing plants burst forth from them is a miracle to me; one that never becomes less awe-inspiring no matter how many times I witness it. I become part of nature's never-ending cycle of energy and growth as I plant and tend my garden, and then see my energy multiplied and returned as life-sustaining food. When plants complete their life cycle, the parts that can't be eaten go into the compost, which in turn enriches the next crop as the cycle begins anew.

I want my children to experience this life cycle, so that they can gain a reverence for the earth and an appreciation for where our food comes from. And, hopefully, to have some fun while they're at it!

Being part of the garden group also helps me to form community, to get to know like-minded souls, to learn, and to contribute my own experience. And though it may sound corny, there really is something profound about being one of many pairs of hands, sharing a project that would be too overwhelming for any one individual. There's an intriguing rhythm to our garden work; we come together once or twice a month to work as a group, yet the rest of the time we are free as individuals to come and go, to plant what we choose, to tend as much or as little as we see fit. It's a wonderful study in the similarities and contrasts between individuality and community, and why both are essential for physical and spiritual wellbeing.

Keeping the garden organic can be a challenge. Sometimes work parties turn into literal bug hunts as we pluck pests by the hundreds from plants and dispatch them into jars of soapy water, or spray plants with garlic-and-jalapeno tea. Instead of quick-and-easy douses of Miracle Gro and Roundup, we rake in compost and manure, pluck weeds, and lay down blankets of cardboard and mulch.

Why go to all this effort? Why not just buy vegetables from the store? Aside from the ways the garden nourishes our souls, characters, and community, there are tremendous benefits to eating fresh, local, organic produce. It helps to reduce our carbon footprint. It preserves the integrity of the plants, the earth and the groundwater by not polluting them with pesticides or chemical fertilizers. It allows us to eat the vegetables when they are ripe, with nutrients at their peak. Commercially grown produce is often bathed in chemicals, picked green before it's developed much nutritional value, and shipped long distances, further depleting and polluting the environment.

Did I mention the flavor factor? Nothing tastes as amazing as vegetables fresh from the garden. My peas rarely make it home; my children crack open and devour them as fast as we can pick them. And, as the song says, "There's just two things that money can't buy, and that's true love and home-grown tomatoes."

There's also a reverence that accompanies eating home-grown produce; the act of consuming the finished fruit contains the memory of all the care, time and effort that went into producing it. And I believe that love, that energy, is transferrable.

That's why I find the community outreach part of our mission to be the most powerful aspect of our work in the garden. When we think of food drives for those in need, we think of cans and boxes. Which are, of course, essential to every food bank. Yet picture yourself in a position of need, facing nothing but cans and boxes of processed food. Grateful for the assistance, yes. Yet these cans and boxes, though they sustain the body, do they nourish the soul? The soul that hungers for comfort just as deeply as the stomach does in a time of such need?

Now think of the gift of receiving a fresh home-grown tomato or head of lettuce or juicy pepper. A true gift of living energy, a personal sharing of compassion from the human hands that grew the vegetables to the equally human hands that receive them. Would it be surprising to learn that many local agencies which provide food or meals to the needy also accept fresh foods in addition to canned goods?

As of August 1 2011, our Community Harvest Garden has donated over 400 pounds of produce this year alone, distributed between Samaritan Inn, God's Food Pantry, Hope's Door, and City House. Since we broke ground in 2007, our grand total has been nearly a ton of fresh vegetables, each one grown—as the gift cards we tuck into each donation say—with love and organic methods by Community Harvest gardeners.

In 2011 we voted unanimously to increase our donations, from roughly ten percent of what we grow to half, which has dramatically expanded our giving power already. As our garden size, expertise and enthusiasm continue to grow, we look forward to sharing even more homegrown bounty with the wider community.