Small is Beautiful 2013: Supporting Educators in Creating Model Gardens

Gardening has become a leading activity among educators, volunteers, and a host of community organizations and agencies. Within Cooperative Extension, garden programs are growing at a seemingly exponential rate. Many gardens struggle to sustain themselves, often feeling pressure to develop new garden programs rather than enhance current ones. Many CCE horticulture and 4-H youth development educators have stated that it is challenging to secure funding for their garden projects, both to kick-start the project, or keep it going and secure specific supply needs. Cornell Garden Based Learning responded to this need by offering a mini-grant program to NYS CCE Garden Educators, called Small is Beautiful.

The Small is Beautiful project made available funds of $250 to $400 to 8 garden projects across New York State. While these amounts may seem so miniscule, the request for proposals surfaced a number of other opportunities including encouraging applicants to think intentionally about their proposed garden program. Applicants were required to consider ecological gardening techniques, cross-CCE-program collaboration, inclusion of youth leadership, and to explain their documentation and evaluation methods.

CGBL received 26 RFP’s. The eight selected projects were instructed to document successes and challenges, ecological strategies utilized, the number of people their garden reached during the 2013 season and in what educational capacity, as well as to visually document with photos or videos.

Although the growing season, and therefore formal project reporting have hypothetically ceased, project leaders have continued to keep their projects active. Some gardens are under a winter cover crop; some leaders are planning spring tours and educational activities for the coming year, while others are conducting winter classes regarding diverse facets of garden-based learning and program planning, such as propagation, replenishing soils, and updating social media outlets. Leaders are eager to grow, expand, and revise their projects throughout 2014 and beyond. We look forward to continuing to hear about the successes of each project and plan to offer Small is Beautiful again in 2014.

Small is Beautiful Grantees
The eight gardens from around the State were each unique, including rain gardens, youth composting research, integration of year-round cover cropping, native plantings, perennial edible plants in a public park, growing popcorn and peanuts with children and youth, and many cooking sessions with freshly harvested vegetables. As of November 2013, project leaders reported that the number of people engaged in the garden project ranged from 25 to 400 individuals per garden.
The goal of the Keene Central School Composting and Garden Project in Essex County is to connect students with the cycle of their food via hands-on learning. The project successfully engaged over 100 elementary students whom harvested tomatoes, onions, garlic, potatoes, and peppers from the garden, learned about and planted cover crops, compost and used their harvest in a variety of recipes, and helped to put their garden to bed for the winter.

**Highlight:** Broad student involvement and exciting with monitoring compost temperature and seeing it remain above 100°.

The Zoo Garden in Jefferson County used sheet mulching to reclaim a very overgrown weedy eyesore and transform it into an attractive garden filled with annual and perennial native plants that blend with the zoo landscape.

**Highlight:** The zoo features only animals native to NYS, so the garden fits perfectly.

In Onondaga County, the test gardens at the SW Community Farm create a space for Master Gardener Volunteers to demonstrate ecological gardening techniques, provide a learning space for home gardeners to learn about new growing techniques, and engage neighborhood youth in gardening and engaging in sampling varieties. The garden also utilized overwintered wheat/vetch cover crop that they mulched into a late planting of cucumbers and dill, the concentration of pollinators around flowers and herbs was very noticeable to attracting beneficial insects and this garden also tried the 3 sisters companion planting, though beans didn’t grow well.

**Highlight:** daycare group seeing popcorn and peanuts growing.

Ulster County Rain Garden was installed on the grounds of Ulster Community College. Ironically, several large rainstorms postponed the installation of this garden until July. On the day of installation was another heavy rain and the base of the garden was dry the next morning. The garden was installed using mulching techniques and perennial water-loving plants.

**Highlight:** Collaborating with the College site manager and Master Gardeners.
The Edible Park Project in Tompkins County worked with the Parks Commission and Board of Public Works to create an edible park in downtown Ithaca to show the wide range of traditional and unusual fruits that can grow in upstate NY. Engagement and enthusiasm for the project from neighbors and volunteers has been excellent as well as support from the mayor. Current perennial edible plants will mature over the years and in 2014, the project is adding even more trees, shrubs and an annual vegetable garden space to the park.

Highlight: Over 40 volunteers helped sheet compost the overgrown planting beds.

The Ecologically Designed Demonstration Garden in Seneca County successfully amended the garden’s heavy clay soil with peat and sand and lowered the pH so to grow blueberries. The gardeners successfully grew some veggie plants in hay bales and practiced succession planting to have a continuous harvest. In the fall, the garden was covered with a winter wheat cover crop to continue to build soil.

Highlight: Creation of a Jr. Master Gardener 4-H club, and having other 4-H clubs come to the garden for mini-workshops and hands on time in a garden.

In Putnam County the Garden to Table program works closely with the health department, parks department and schools to address obesity rates above NYS average by demonstrating easy-to-grow vegetables and promoting eating fresh. Use of compost and mulch ensured plentiful harvest all season long. The program hosted workshops on building raised beds, which participants could take home.

Highlight: Workshops were intended to be for adults, however entire families worked together to build the beds. Evaluations showed that attendees were ready to use the techniques they learned.

Over 400 youth and adults engaged with the Chautauqua County Audubon Kitchen Garden, which is used during the Summer Day Camp at a Nature Center. Children learn how food grows and are able to touch and taste food fresh from the garden and adults learn inexpensive ways in which they can create a growing space at their own home, even if space is limited.

Highlight: Setting up and using a rain barrel to collect rainwater to water the garden since the summer was so hot and dry.