

The Real Dirt on St Paul's Community Garden

St Paul's UCC Mechanicsburg, PA

Planting a Seed:

We started our garden about 5 years ago at the gentle urging of our pastor, Rev John Ward-Diorio. OK, it was more than a gentle urging. He saw, before we did, what a garden could do to enhance our congregation's community support activities. He made some suggestions. Then he pushed a little more. It took him a few years, but he found the right people to make it happen and inspired them to act. I remember Rev John walking me around the church yard and pacing off where he envisioned the garden would be. I was not the first (or last) person Rev John walked through his imaginary garden to drum up support. His vision was a much bigger area than we ended up actually plowing. Everyone was rightfully cautious about biting off more than the congregation would be willing to support

We had a few Master Gardeners in the flock who were willing to lend their expertise. But a garden doesn't grow with expertise alone. It takes work. It takes lots of dedicated people to do the work. Brenda Kern has a lifetime of gardening experience. She agreed to coordinate the work to get things started. She paired herself up with our Master Gardeners: Lee Metcalf-Rose and Herb Bomberger. Together they developed a plan. We are also blessed to have a farm family in our congregation, the Paulus's. They provided use of their farm equipment to do the initial (and subsequent) plowing to turn our back lawn from grass to garden.

Taking Root:

From there, it was just church people doing what church people do: leveraging '*the miracle of many hands*'. We had handy folks design and build fencing to keep out the bunnies. We had lots of people who had never held a hoe or rake before volunteer to weed, water, and pick. That first year, we barely had enough produce to serve a few token veggies at our own Harvest dinner. But we had built a garden; and a process. Our garden plot was only about 50 feet by 30 feet. Not huge. But something we could manage.

The next year was our first full growing season. We focused on growing vegetables that anyone could cook; and that we could just take to a local food bank and donate. An outfit called New Hope Ministries, in our area, was happy to help us get the produce into the hands of local people that needed fresh food. The community took notice. Some local churches much, larger than our own, came to ask how we kept our volunteers motivated to continue to help in the garden. Our local United Way saw that we were growing and giving away fresh food (without proselytizing). They offered to host an annual event for their volunteers to come help in the garden. Over the next 4 years we donated an annual average of 1,000 pounds of beans, tomatoes, carrots, squash, onions, potatoes and lettuce to New Hope Ministries to distribute.

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Reap What You Sew:

Here is where it gets kind of crazy. Unknown to us, a huge corporation far away in Battle Creek, Michigan had approached the national United Way organization about places that would be good to do some community outreach where they could make a difference. The national United Way reached out to their local branch here in South Central PA (along with other locations) looking for a good cause to infuse with a monetary grant. The company is called Kellogg's. Perhaps you have heard of them. Kellogg's donated, through the United Way, three thousand dollars for us to use to improve our little garden. In addition to the monetary grant, the United Way and Kellogg's joined forces to provide us with a day of United Way volunteers; along with breakfast, lunch and many, many boxes of corn flakes (go figure) to package for local food bank use. It would all serve as a big media event to raise awareness about our garden.

When we received word of this blessing, it just so happened that Brenda Kern, who had spearheaded the management of the garden in the first place had rotated back in as the garden chairperson after several years of serving elsewhere (divine intervention, perhaps?). Brenda realized she had a bit of a problem. She wanted to increase the *yield* of the garden, but not increase the work required to *tend* the garden. Brenda quickly laid out a plan to expand the garden, but just by a third. She also allocated the majority of the funds to automate one of the most time consuming tasks: the watering of the garden. This allowed us to increase our yield without taxing the time and enthusiasm of our volunteers.

Bountiful Harvest:

Today we have an expanded garden fence that encompasses roughly a 50 by 50 foot square. And with our new (volunteer built) fully automated solar powered irrigation system with 8 high-mounted sprinklers, 8 movable smaller sprinklers, 500 feet of soaker hose, and 8 water gauges in our hydraulic tool kit: no plant need go thirsty. And we all can't wait to hear the announcement of this year's total donation yield.

For any other churches looking to start a garden, remember that we didn't start with lots of funds. We started with one man's vision and a lot of cooperation and dedication to our community.

We use the garden to teach our youth and ourselves about farming, sustainability and food issues.

Most important, we have a truly Community Garden. Many people not previously connected with our church have put in volunteer time in the garden. Many more neighbors in need have enjoyed and been nourished by the fresh vegetables without knowing where they came from. And that is just fine with us.

“for I was hungry and you gave me food,”

Matthew 25:35