



Lake Region Takes Root Community Garden Beginning to Sprout

“Creating partnerships with volunteer groups and food recipients has been the key to increasing access to healthy foods in our region.”

Jason Bergstrand,
Community Garden Coordinator



Creating healthy communities requires innovative vision as well as community participation. One such vision became reality when Lake Region Healthcare partnered with two community organizations, Otter Tail County Public Health and PartnerSHIP 4 Health, to create the *Lake Region Takes Root Community Garden*. This garden relies on volunteers to plant, weed, and harvest the garden and then shares its produce with Otter Tail County entities such as WIC-families, food shelves, residential settings, and organizations that serve mental health consumers.

Lake Region Takes Root Community Garden began in 2013 with a donation of 1.6 acres of land to Lake Region Healthcare; during that first summer harvest season, the garden produced 1544 pounds of food and served over 900 people. During this same year an orchard of 29 pear, plum, apple, and cherry trees was also planted, with fruit available in 2016. In 2014, the garden increased in size and hopes to produce ten times the produce. This year the garden has corn, watermelon, lettuce, spinach, beans, carrots, beets, radishes, onions, zucchini, potatoes, kohlrabi, kale, green beans, snap peas, bell peppers, cabbage, eggplant, cauliflower, broccoli, peppers, and tomatoes. It also has herbs, such as chives, basil, rosemary, thyme, and edible nasturtiums flowers.

Once the produce is harvested, WIC families are able to pick up freshly harvested produce from the garden or receive it during their regularly scheduled WIC visits. WIC families are also encouraged to volunteer in the garden; in this way they can learn about gardening as well as contribute to the health of their community. Involving children in the garden introduces them to fresh produce and entices them to sample the produce.

One mother said, “The first thing [my son] asked me to plant in my own garden was snap peas. Now all my snap peas are gone because he was so excited and he went out there to eat them.” That was because last year, when I brought him to the community garden, he saw other kids eating snap peas and it was more than just mom eating snap peas.” The *Lake Regions Takes Root Community Garden* is providing families with the opportunity to teach their children the importance of healthy eating, as well as helping them understand the growing and gardening process.

Another mother discussed the community aspect of the garden and how being around other parents with similar values is exciting. “It feels good to see other people who also want to be healthy and to raise healthy kids. It is fun to grow food and make kids excited to grow food. The community garden also helps our kids to grow a passion for gardening and healthy eating.”

The community garden enables people of all ages to enhance their gardening skills; the more experienced gardeners readily share their knowledge with others. One mother commented that “it is a little bit of a relief to get into situations where we are all helping each other and we are all benefitting.”

This garden is growing people as well as produce; volunteers obtain valuable life skills as well as increased access to fresh produce. As one parent said, “This is what excites me the most – to teach gardening to someone else who may not have been exposed to it otherwise. They will be able to take this with them, wherever they go, and be able to teach it to their kids. This garden is really impacting people.”

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