

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Teaming up with refugees to embrace diverse cultural and gardening objectives

AT A GLANCE

Master gardener learns the importance of listening, learning and understanding cultural diversity for making a successful community garden.

The Situation

Since the 1970s over 55,000 refugees have called Idaho home. People fleeing persecution, conflict or socioeconomic deprivation have been granted asylum in foreign lands for thousands of years. In addition to trauma suffered previously, refugees face additional difficulty of assimilating into their new location. Lack of education, job training, and the inability to speak and read English makes finding a job problematic. Without a job, they often must grow their own food. During the past four years most of the refugees locating to Idaho have come from the Congo. Helping the Congolese immigrants grow their own food is one way to relieve the pressures these refugees face.

Our Response

Over the years, Ada County master gardeners have taught garden classes and served as advisors for many church, school and public community gardens. When Advanced Master Gardener (AMG) Carolyn Watts accepted the responsibility of supervising an existing church community garden to complete her AMG practicum, she never dreamed what a grand journey of discovery she would embark upon. The garden consisted of 18 plots with 3-4 feet wide pathways between



A community gardener finishes clearing her garden plot for the next intercropping of unique vegetables and greens.

each plot for a total garden size of 11,000 square feet. A small budget existed that was generated from gardeners' plot rental fees of \$40 per plot per year.

The former garden coordinator outlined numerous issues that he had dealt with such as gardeners refusing to weed communal pathways, weedy gardens and poor attendance at "weeding days," and the fall cleanup. Irrigation equipment and tools kept getting broken and trash was thrown everywhere. Carolyn realized something was amiss; she wanted the garden to be a success. As the new supervisor she decided to be friendly, helpful, and willing to listen and learn; what that encouraged she found was gardener compliance and cheerfulness.

Program Outcomes

Previously, communication with the 50 plus gardeners was in English. Meeting with the gardeners, Carolyn learned that most spoke little English and could not read English. The Russian and Congolese/Burundi gardeners used their young children as translators. Letters sent to gardeners and garden signage now are printed in English, Russian and Swahili with explanatory pictures.

The African gardeners felt that weeding the pathways didn't make sense, as they were eating the "weeds" that grew there. To accommodate this practice, all the pathways except one were eliminated; this created room for four new plots which were taken within hours. While the Russian gardeners preferred planting in rows, the African gardeners practiced intercropping (a technique of growing several different plant species together). They spread various seeds thickly and allowed the plants to grow together in a "messy" tangle. The close-growing pea and bean plants competed with and smothered weeds. Most of the other "weeds" turned out to be cultivated amaranth (*Amaranthus* spp.) called *m'chicha* in Swahili and used as a nutritious green. Amaranth is one of the most common vegetables eaten in Africa^a.

Past weeding and cleanup days occurred on Saturdays, which was not conducive for many of the gardeners who worked weekend jobs. Thus, cleanup days were eliminated, and a compost pile was constructed for green debris. Gardeners are now simply instructed to keep their plants and weeds out of their neighbors' gardens. Annual tilling of the garden ceased, and a "no-till" method was enacted encouraging gardeners to keep the same plots from year to year. This made participants more eager to keep their plots weed-free. The non-plant trash problem was solved by placing garbage cans around the garden.

Water always was a major concern in the garden. The water source was a well. The irrigation system consisted of 20 sprinklers on risers held up by cement blocks. The blocks often were bumped, and the irrigation pipes damaged. To prevent future troubles, the cinderblocks were sold, and metal T-posts purchased to secure the risers. The irrigation is on a single timer that waters early in the morning; there was no water tap in the garden. Gardeners were bringing water from their homes in buckets and other containers to wash with or water new seedlings. This water shortage was alleviated with the purchase of a 330-gallon food-grade water tote that was filled every few weeks.

Impacts:

- The \$40 garden plot fee was a hardship for many of the gardeners; a women's group at the church agreed to sponsor the garden in upcoming years.
- Instead of opening the garden at the traditional time of May 1 and closing it on Nov. 1, the garden will remain open longer to encourage gardeners to plant fall and early spring crops.
- Through the City of Boise's community give-back program, Carolyn will apply for 35 yards of free Boise City compost delivered to the garden each spring.
- Carolyn verbally gleaned recipes from the gardeners, test cooked the recipes at home and photographed the dishes. A Community Garden Cookbook was compiled to sell at the church bazaar to raise funds for the garden.
- A monthly update was added to the church newsletter so the congregation could stay informed about "happenings" in the garden.

^a WS Jansen van Rensburg et al. 2004. Role of indigenous leafy vegetables in combating hunger and malnutrition. *South African Journal of Botany*. 70(1): 52-59.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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2-22-sbell-cultural-gardens • 1/22