

NICA's Backyard Gardening Pilot Program Progress Report, June 2014

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Executive Summary:

In collaboration with the Tarrant County Food Policy Council's Working Group on Community Gardens & Urban Agriculture (CGUA), Northside Inter-Community Agency (NICA) instituted a backyard gardening program for low-income Latino/Latina families on the North Side of Fort Worth in Spring 2014. Ten women successfully completed a three-session gardening curriculum that was developed by Lance Jepson and Katey Rudd of CGUA and taught at NICA in February and early March by Tarrant County Master Gardeners Caryn Hutchinson and Mike Warren. Volunteers from NICA and TCU and members of Feed by Grace's Project GROWTH initiative then built a raised-bed garden in each woman's backyard in March and April. The women all planted their gardens, and most of them have successfully raised a diverse array of healthy produce for their families, including jalapeños and other hot peppers, cucumber, squash, zucchini, cilantro, bell peppers, and tomatoes.

About the CGUA Backyard Gardening Curriculum:

In Fall 2013, Lance Jepson and Katey Rudd of the CGUA TCFPC Working Group began developing a Backyard Gardening Curriculum using materials provided by Texas Agrilife Extension and other sources. The curriculum consists of three hands-on lessons: 1) Composting and Soils, 2) Planning and Planting, and 3) Tending and Harvesting. After completing these three lessons, students will know the basics of how to grow produce in their backyards or in community gardens. Although the curriculum is open access and freely available to all, CGUA's

goal is especially to bring it to members of low-income communities in Fort Worth, to help them more easily access low-cost, healthy produce.

Piloting the CGUA Backyard Gardening Curriculum with NICA:

NICA kindly agreed to serve as the first pilot partner for the CGUA Backyard Gardening Curriculum, with Robert Ludlow coordinating the logistics. A group of low-income women from NICA's ESL class (generously funded by the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy) expressed interest in taking the backyard gardening course; if they attended all three classes, a raised-bed garden would be installed in their backyards free of charge. Tarrant County Master Gardeners Caryn Hutchinson and Mike Warren volunteered to teach the classes at NICA's main offices in February and March 2014. Ten women attended all three classes.

Because the curriculum was written and taught in English, some of the women in the class who were primary Spanish-language speakers sometimes had difficulty following along. To address this issue, the master gardeners began writing a list of key vocabulary on the board at the start of each lesson, and provided a Spanish-English dictionary of garden terms for the students. Students who could understand English more easily also helped the others.

NICA then hosted two Saturday work days during which three raised bed gardens were built each day by volunteers from NICA and TCU, with helpful oversight from Master Gardeners Linda Hawkins, Lance Jepson, and Mike Warren, and TAFB Community Garden Coordinator Katey Rudd. Each garden is 4 x 8 feet and constructed with cinder blocks (see below). Compost, organic fertilizer, and soil were donated to fill each garden. Feed by Grace donated the soil and built four gardens themselves as part of their Project GROWTH initiative. In all ten backyard

gardens were constructed, one for each woman who had completed the curriculum. All of the women expressed sincere gratitude for their gardens, and a desire to get them planted and growing as soon as possible.



Figure 1. One of the backyard gardens built for a NICA ESL student in April 2014.

Numerous seeds and transplants were donated by individuals and groups throughout the community, including members of Shiloh Field Community Garden in Denton. The Tarrant County Master Gardeners Association was especially generous with their donations of starter plants, and Redenta's Garden Shops kindly donated dozens of seed packets. The seeds and plants were delivered to NICA and the women planted their gardens in April and May 2014.

The women are having quite a bit of success with their gardens. All of the students planted their gardens, and most of them have already raised a diverse array of healthy produce for their families, including jalapeños and other hot peppers, cucumber, squash, zucchini, cilantro, bell peppers, and tomatoes. This is especially impressive since about half of the group had never gardened before. It is a pleasure to see them so excited; they can't wait to share

pictures of how well their plants are doing (see below). Having the chance to take the CGUA Backyard Gardening Curriculum, as well as having gardens built in their backyards and seeds and transplants provided to plant in them, all made it much easier for the women to start growing healthy vegetables.



Figure 2. Radishes and more growing in one NICA ESL student's backyard garden, June 2014.

The NICA pilot of the CGUA Backyard Gardening Curriculum was successful due to the actions of so many professionals and volunteers who helped make it happen. NICA is proud to be a community partner of the CGUA and appreciates the help of the Master Gardeners Association, Feed by Grace, and the many others who contributed to the project.

Next Steps:

When ESL classes begin again in Fall 2014, NICA hopes to found a Garden Club with the ten women who completed the Backyard Gardening Curriculum as charter members. This will allow the women to share information about their gardening successes and challenges with each other, and provide a venue for them to ask questions, ideally with a master gardener present to answer them. The NICA Garden Club members can also serve as advisors and perhaps volunteers for a community garden that NICA plans to construct near their offices. Such a garden will allow NICA to both grow fresh produce to donate to their food pantry and to provide a place and model for other North Side residents to learn how to grow their own healthy vegetables.