

Denver Urban Gardens

uniting neighbors for gardening success

Community gardens and school gardens are usually separate entities, but one Colorado organization has found that combining them can yield surprising benefits for both.

BY JANE KUHN

DENVER URBAN GARDENS (DUG) facilitates one of the country's largest community garden networks, with more than 120 gardens throughout Colorado's capital. To date, 35 of these community gardens are located on school grounds. Although all of these school-based gardens are remarkably diverse in structure, community, and history, they share the unifying goals of strengthening community ties and serving as an educational outlet for youth.

This common thread is at the heart of DUG's mission to "grow community—one urban garden at a time." From providing construction and planning guidance to implementing educational programming, DUG maintains a supportive presence during every stage of a garden's creation and maintenance. The organization has been coordinating community garden enterprises since 1985, but started working with schools only about a decade ago, when the city's public schools and other Denver-area schools transitioned from a forced busing system to neighborhood schools.

"Parents and community leaders were immediately invested in the idea of improving their out-of-date neighborhood school yards into spaces for both integrated, hands-



Students from Fairview Elementary Community Garden and their volunteer mentor help out at the garden's farmer's market, which offers produce they grow.

on learning and community engagement," explains Michael Buchenau, DUG's executive director. "Not only were they looking to improve the learning environments for their children, they also saw the potential in these spaces to benefit themselves and their neighborhood as well."

Each year, four to six new neighborhoods receive DUG's assistance with the implementation of a school-based community garden. Rather than implementing a single gardening model in every location, DUG works with each space's unique characteristics in order



Plants ramble up trellises or grow under row-cover. Compost heaps and a colorful tool shed complete the scene.

With the primary goals of creating avenues of access to healthy food, providing agricultural education, and cultivating underutilized urban land, SCF's many endeavors include a farm camp, a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, educational workshops, cooking classes, a youth-led farmer's market, and fun community events like "weed dating."

The farm also yields plentiful organic produce that has benefited both the school and the community. Last year, SCF produced nearly six tons of produce that was divided between the Denver Green School cafeteria, community partners who work with recently resettled refugee families and local emergency food relief programs, and



Harvesting vegetables is a gratifying activity for both adult volunteers, top left, and third-graders, left, in the extensive Sprout City Farms vegetable garden on the grounds of the Denver Green School.

the group's CSA program and "pay-what-you-can" Farm Stand.

"Having a farm on school grounds is an important part of helping students understand the connection between food, the environment, and health," says Alison Hatch, SCF development and outreach director. "Students see first-hand the benefits of nourishing the land so that it can in-turn produce the nourishing food they eat in their cafeteria."

MENTOR-GUIDED EMPOWERMENT

Next to the recess yard at Bradley International School, raised beds of many shapes and sizes overflow with plants. Some follow themes, such as a pizza garden or a salad garden, and others are two-foot by two-foot mini-plots where students can grow whatever they want. These various yet congruent beds all comprise the Heather Regan Memorial Garden.

One of its most successful ways of engaging the community is through a DUG program called Connecting Generations that facilitates intergenerational mentorship. "Connecting Generations mentors are individuals who mostly live in the neighborhood but have no direct connection to the

to create the most benefit for its respective community or neighborhood.

A FARM FOR EVERYONE

Take for example Sprout City Farms (SCF), a one-acre vegetable garden on the grounds of the Denver Green School in southeast Denver. While SCF operates as its own entity, it works intimately with the school, DUG, and the neighboring

community. A few short years ago, the innovative structure and educational programming that exists at SCF and the community gardens that neighbor it (also on the grounds of the Denver Green School) were all merely ideas held by parents and community members. Today, just beyond the school's parking lot are rows and rows of greens, onions, beans, squash, and many other veggies.



With the help of adult mentors, students at the Bradley International School grow vegetables and flowers in the school's Heather Regan Memorial Garden, left and above.

school,” explains Jessica Romer, community initiatives coordinator for DUG. “Either by becoming a community gardener or being recruited by DUG staff, these mentors engage in a non-traditional way with their neighborhood school and can give back using their professional and life skill sets.” During the spring and fall, students and their mentors participate in an after-school garden club to explore science, reading, writing, and cooking through the garden. Students also have access to the garden and their mentors during recess.

For Connecting Generations mentors, it’s all about helping their charges feel invested in the plots at the garden, which can yield greater nutritional and academic benefits. The students are more likely to eat a wider variety and greater volume of vegetables because they have been involved in the growing process. Students also benefit academically by being encouraged to explore interdisciplinary connections between their classroom work and garden activities.

TRANSCENDING DIFFERENCES

The Fairview Elementary Community Garden serves the culturally diverse Sun Valley neighborhood in West Denver, which faces various socioeconomic chal-

lenges. “Although Sun Valley is situated in an industrial area that currently has few if any economic opportunities, no large grocery stores, and an overwhelming presence of transitional and public housing structures,” says Judy Elliot, the garden’s education and community empowerment coordinator employed by DUG, “it is rich in immigrant diversity and resilience.”

With a multitude of native countries and backgrounds represented in the community, the Fairview garden has become a unique vehicle for sharing and celebrating different cultures. Elliot works with students in the garden and classroom to increase culinary, gardening, and community-building skills. Students also participate in DUG’s Connecting Gen-



This colorful mural, painted by students at the Fairview Elementary Community Garden, highlights the garden’s influence on the urban neighborhood that surrounds it.

TOP LEFT: COURTESY OF DUG. TOP RIGHT: COURTESY OF ALETHEA MCCLUNE. BOTTOM: COURTESY OF DUG

erations program, the Fairview Youth Farmer's Market, and a summer youth employment program.

Another unique feature of this garden is that DUG has designated it as a site for the organization's education team to "explore new lessons, activities, recipes, and approaches before sharing them with the general public," says Romer. "It is also a training site where teachers, parents, and volunteers from across the city participate in hands-on lessons about the multitude of ways to utilize a garden for learning."

GROWING ON

Each of these garden models demonstrates that "gardening, and the resulting harvest, is a universally relatable activity," says Romer. "It has the power to reach across cultures, continents, generations, languages, and gender." Each site is not only a place for growing beautiful and edible plants, but is also a space for making tangible educational connections, strengthening community vitality, and contributing to a more sustainable food system.

Although demand for more community gardens in the Denver area has increased dramatically in the past several years, DUG's leaders are careful not to expand its network too fast. The goal is to grow at a modest enough rate to effectively support the development of new gardens while maintaining support of existing garden sites.

DUG itself has steadily grown to the point of meriting more spacious digs to accommodate it and enable it to expand its programs. This past summer, it moved into a new office that not only "provides enough space for our staff, interns, and volunteers," says Romer, "but we also now have access to multiple collaborative spaces to host our various trainings, workshops, and activities with garden leaders, youth educators, gardeners, and the public."

The larger the audience DUG can reach, the more benefits schools and their neighborhoods will reap. Given the organization's solid foundation and impressive track record, it is well positioned to continue growing community, one urban garden at a time. ☺

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LESSONS FROM DUG GARDENS

Each year during the American Horticultural Society's National Children & Youth Garden Symposium (NCYGS), participants from around the country share success stories and best practices centric to youth gardening. The 2013 NCYGS, held in the Denver area, included a tour that showcased DUG's work with schools. Symposium attendees had the opportunity to experience several different garden spaces, see the neighborhoods in which they were located, and learn from each garden's youth and community members.

"Touring the extraordinary DUG sites provided a wonderful gateway for learning firsthand what it takes to create successful and dynamic school gardens," says AHS Executive Director Tom Underwood.



At the Heather Regan Memorial Garden, symposium attendees hear from one of the garden's Connecting Generations mentors, above. A student from Fairview Elementary shows symposium attendees around its community garden, right.



The level of "persistence and cooperation" required to bring these collaborative gardens to fruition impressed Kim Bailey, an environmental outreach coordinator from Cumming, Georgia. She also notes that the enthusiasm of the volunteers "for working with the children in the garden is truly infectious!"

Nathan Larson, an education director from Madison, Wisconsin, felt the gardens demonstrated that one clear key to success is "the integral and vital role that various community partners can play in supporting school gardens." For example, engaging community members helps provide upkeep for the school gardens over the summer.

"Each garden powerfully illustrated the many positive benefits of engaging youth in gardening on both the individual and community level," says Underwood, "and we hope these will inspire similar programs in other areas of the country." ☺

—J.K.