



COMMUNITY GARDENS

In 2008 the District began its community garden endeavor. The District received a request by a local Warren resident about the possibility of the District having community garden plots that citizens could rent just like the State Hospital used to have at the Farm Colony site. The District thought this was a great idea and pursued it in the next growing season.

The first step was to figure out a location and how many plots to start with. Due to renters needing good access to their plots the present location was selected. An entrance off of Hatch Run Road was already present and the area was not being used for any other purpose or project so it was deemed the location of the gardens.



In 2008 the District started with 10 garden plots that were 25' x 25'. The District charges \$25.00 for each plot to offset costs of materials for the layout and for the preparation of the soil by plowing and tilling.

A big thank you goes out to one of the District's Directors

Robert Sleeman and Hatch Patch owner Scott Wenzel for preparing the soil each year.

Mainly through word of mouth and two news releases, all the garden plots were rented for the 2008 season. The summer of 2008 was a hot dry one which was an obstacle for renters since they have to provide their own water. Even with these conditions folks had some very nice gardens that would make some jealous.



Because of the success of the gardens in 2008 and the interest generated, the District decided to expand the garden plots for the 2009 season. The gardens were expanded from ten plots in 2008 to eighteen plots in 2009. Hopefully in 2010 a few more plots will be added to accommodate those folks who didn't get a plot in 2009. Overall the community gardens have been a great success for the District and at the same time people are getting their hands dirty, getting outdoors, and growing some of their own produce. There is nothing better than enjoying

something you grew on your own that never traveled hundreds of miles, was packaged and frozen, or was sprayed with who knows what for preservatives. It is very rewarding watching something grow from seed to table.

Unfortunately in 2009 the weather was rainy, cool, and rainy. These factors caused our very first garden issue that was a real sad problem. Due to the weather conditions Late Blight was a major factor on this year's tomato crop and also got some potatoes too. Late Blight killed most of the tomatoes that people had planted that were growing quite nicely. This fungal blight is the same blight that caused the start of the potato famine in September of 1845 in Ireland. The picture below shows what happens to tomatoes that get Late Blight.



Garden renters were asked to remove all infected tomato and potato plants and place them in garbage bags and the District will be burning them to prevent the fungus from overwintering in the soil which



would cause the same problems next year if it is another rainy cool summer. There are very few ways to control the blight and once you have it you are fighting an uphill battle.

New this year, avid volunteer, biologist, and ecologist, Pam Stoleson, started a Family Gardening project at the Community Gardens with help from the District and their Teacher Naturalists, Warren County Penn State Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners, and the Warren Public Library. The volunteers and families have been bringing their own tools. Seeds have been donated by several Master Gardeners. So far all the supplies that were needed have been donated free. Several financial donations were also received.

What inspired Pam to take on this great endeavor was the current economy and that people should know how to grow their own food. She wants people to understand what healthy food is, that they can grow their own, and they should buy local whenever possible. As an ecologist she finds it appalling that we import goods from China. The canned mushrooms we buy at the grocery store come from China. Pennsylvania happens to be the largest producer of mushrooms in the U.S. Stores sell organic goods from China! We have no way to check in China if it really was grown organically. If you grow your own you know that it's organic. You know that the earth has been treated respectfully.



According to Master Gardener, Jeff Carlstrom, gardening is a dying art. It takes years to accumulate the knowledge. This hands-on approach is much better than reading a lot of books. It increases their awareness of what it actually takes to put food on their table.

Barbara McGuinness and her sons Sean and Ryan are dedicated to the gardening project. Sean says "It's been really fun and a great experience". His favorite vegetables are carrots and sugar snap peas. He planted a Chinese vegetable that sounded interesting and has never had it before. When Sean becomes an adult he wants to pass on family gardening to his own children and extends an invitation to everyone else because it's a really fun time and a great community project.

Barbara has had her own garden at her home, but has learned a lot from this project and what she has done wrong in the past. It has been a nice experience for her and her children. Her children are learning and having fun with their mom, getting a chance to do community service, and working towards the goal of selling the vegetables at the

Farmer's Market or donating the vegetables to a local church pantry.

This is a pilot program that has involved only two families. The children wrote down their five favorite vegetables. All of these vegetables have been planted plus some extras. They have been meeting on Saturday mornings depending on everyone's schedule. They even had some guest speakers.

So much can be learned from experienced gardeners. Digging a cone-shaped hole helps direct the water to the plant's roots. Plant potatoes in a recessed area and as the plant grows, add soil around the plant. Planting marigolds every four feet in the garden controls nematodes. Place wet straw around the plants to keep the soil moist. Compost and fish emulsion are great organic fertilizers. When the soil is very wet, every impression makes the soil like an adobe brick, so don't walk in your seed beds anymore than necessary.

Gardening offers family fun. The benefits, quality time with the family in the fresh air, shaving the monthly food bill, getting kids off the electronics and into the soil, and of course all of the healthy vegetables, are bountiful. Growing vegetables or herbs teaches children that plants, like people, need food and water to grow and stay healthy. Caring for plants helps develop responsibility and builds self-esteem when kids see what they can grow.