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Engaging People, Engaging in Service: A Case Study of a Community Garden

Authors:

Jon C. Phillips, Associate Professor of Food Marketing and Agribusiness Management and Director of the Center for Food Marketing and Agribusiness Solutions
L. Hays, Graduate Assistant

Both from Cal Poly Pomona University, Pomona, California, USA

Contact information:

Jon C. Phillips
California State Polytechnic University, Pomona
3801 West Temple Ave.
Pomona, CA 91768
Ph. 909 869 3721
Fax 909 869 4454
Email jcphillips@csupomona.edu

Poster prepared for presentation at the Agricultural and Applied Economics Association's 2011
AAEA & NAREA Joint Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, July 24-26, 2011

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Introduction:

Many consumers in the U.S. are becoming more concerned about where their food comes from. This phenomenon can be attributed in part to the fact that, on average, society is becoming better off financially. The trend of people wanting to know where their food comes from has been reflected in the increased proliferation and popularity of farmers' markets. Other supply chains, including U-pick operations, roadside stands, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) enterprises, and community gardens are becoming more popular. Such supply chains are viewed as more environmentally sustainable because they reduce the distance that food travels before it is consumed (i.e., food miles). This poster presents a case study of developing an alternative supply chain, namely, setting up a community garden.

In the spring of 2009, the leaders of Faith Lutheran Church in San Dimas, California decided to establish a garden on their property. They were inspired by the Slow Food movement to provide fresh, organic produce to members of the church and the community. The Slow Food movement, which started in Italy, seeks to counteract what it considers the negative effects of the globalization of the agri-food system (Schneider, 2008). This research examines the establishment of a new community garden. We will also discuss some of the barriers to establishing and maintaining a community garden.

Literature Review:

Several studies show the effectiveness of community gardens in improving the nutrition, agricultural knowledge, and well-being of community members who participate in garden programs. Such studies also identify characteristics of successful gardens and barriers to starting and maintaining a community garden. Wakefield and Yeudall (2007) reported the health impacts of a South East Toronto community garden on its participants. The benefits identified by Wakefield and Yeudall included better access to fresh, wholesome food, better nutrition, increased exercise, access to organic food, better mental health, community building/increased community involvement, better self-esteem, and beautification of the area. Among concerns expressed by the gardeners were insecure tenure and funding, litter, vandalism, personal safety, and pollution. Voluntad et al (2003) described the benefits of Pendleton, Oregon's Pendleton Community Garden Project (PCPG). Food from the garden was used in food banks and senior meal programs. 2,400 hours were donated to maintain the garden and 3,000 pounds of fresh produce were given to the needy and homebound seniors. Senior and youth participants gained knowledge about collaborating to develop and maintain community projects. In a 2003 study by Twiss and Dickenson, California Healthy Cities and Communities (CHCC) funded community garden programs for Berkeley, San Bernardino, Escondido, Loma Linda, Oceanside, and West Hollywood. Key elements in the success of each of these gardens included: commitment of local leadership and staffing, involvement of volunteers and community partners, and availability of skill building opportunities for participants. Community gardens allowed the California cities featured in this paper to address important community issues while uniting residents and enacting beneficial community policies.

Goals of Project:

- Develop a point of differentiation, or identity, for the church.
- Help people learn to provide for food needs and care for creation in a responsible way.
- Generate interest in Faith Lutheran Church.
 - Develop a food exchange among parishioners and, later, the community.
 - Host a dinner featuring food from the garden. Invite parishioners and community members.
 - Implement gardening workshops, led by experts, for parishioners and community members.
 - Donate fresh produce to the local food pantry.
- Promote agricultural literacy, especially among young people.
- Enhance awareness of sustainability and locally grown food.
- Run the garden at no cost to the church.

Timeline:

Month	Activity
April, 2009	Slow Food Garden first considered.
May	First planning meeting – location selected.
June	Monthly meeting. Dedication of garden.
July	Monthly meeting.
August	Monthly meeting. Covered with plastic to eliminate grass.
September	Monthly meeting.
October	Monthly meeting. Garden site uncovered. Dead grass removed. Compost bins built.
November	Monthly meeting.
December	Monthly meeting.
January, 2010	Monthly meeting.
February	Monthly meeting.
March	Monthly meeting. Removed weeds. Reconfigured sprinkler heads. Work day with backhoe (leveled ground and dug down to install anti-gopher mesh). Dug trench around perimeter for interlocking blocks (i.e., boundary of garden).
April	Monthly meeting.
May	Monthly meeting.
June	Monthly meeting.
July	---
August	Monthly meeting. Walls (boundary) installed. Irrigation subbed out. Compost added.
September	---
October	Monthly meeting.
November	Monthly meeting.
December	Monthly meeting.
January, 2011	Monthly meeting.
February	Monthly meeting. First planting, 13 crops.
March	Monthly meeting.
April	Monthly meeting. First harvest (radishes and lettuce). Second planting, 6 crops.

Exhibit 1: Timeline of events in starting and operating the garden.

Costs:

Item/service purchased	Cost
Electrical rerouting, modifying irrigation	\$993
Irrigation connection to flow device	\$105.75
Container (i.e., barrier walls)	\$3,680
Compost bins	\$150
Mesh	\$120
Items/services that were donated: Plants, seeds, soil, use of backhoe, and labor.	

Exhibit 2: Cost table for community garden items.

Results and Lessons Learned:

The garden at Faith Lutheran Church is approximately 33 by 22 feet. The first planting included the following items: garlic, jalapeno peppers, lettuce, cauliflower, carrots, radishes, snap peas, green beans, tomatoes, onions, broccoli, and various types of herbs. A team of about six members voluntarily maintains the garden, spending about half an hour per week performing activities such as weeding and harvesting. Their first harvest was in April, and they plan to plant new, organic fruits and vegetables each season. Food from the first harvest was served at the church. The second planting also took place in April. It included sweet corn, eggplant, yellow squash, tomatoes, broccoli, and cress.

Events did not take place as quickly as everyone would have liked, but once the vegetables started growing, people became very interested. All gardening tools, materials, and labor were donated by the congregation. Surprisingly, ideas about gardening techniques differed among participants, even though everyone resides in the same agro-ecological zone.

The church has faced a few barriers while operating the garden. For example, although the garden has been successful, no one has volunteered to fill the role of project leader. The church also had difficulties with city zoning laws when they tried to build a shed for equipment storage. The team has concerns about trespassing and maintaining community interest, but the future of the Faith Lutheran Church community garden looks promising, nonetheless.



Exhibit 3: Photo of the Slow Food Garden at Faith Lutheran Church, San Dimas, California.

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