

## Sharing the Tomato – A People's Garden

by Jody Christiansen, Public Affairs Specialist, NRCS



Jody Christiansen, NRCS PAS and PG coordinator, and Jeff Zimprich, former acting State Conservationist, plant Abraham Lincoln seeds.

It all began with Abe Lincoln, the tomato that is. As the Illinois NRCS coordinator for People's Garden initiative, I wanted to share the tomato with a local organization here in Champaign. After visiting with fellow employees, we discovered an unofficial People's Garden just up the road from the office. Their garden was designed to help people help themselves.

The Restoration Urban Ministries is home for individuals and

families who have come across tough times. To help them learn new skills and confidence, what better lesson than to plant a garden? Gardening offers many opportunities to teach individuals to care for plants, responsibility for watering and weeding, and enjoying the fruits of their labor.

My colleague, Cara Clark and I met with Restoration employees Linda Cramer and Judy Stoll and talked about the People's Garden, 150 years of USDA and the Abraham Lincoln tomato. Both were delighted to become an official People's Garden. They



Cara Clark, IL VIS, (f) with Judy Stoll and Linda Cramer in front of the Restoration's garden.

accepted the few small tomato plants that I had started from seed, even though they had plenty of other tomatoes growing at that time. Cramer took a few plants home where several of the Restoration workers help with her garden. However, with the drought and late planting, the plants did not produce enough tomatoes to share.

James Lawson, a Restoration staff worker, and his wife Cheryl, are both passionate about the garden. Together they organized the plantings and tended the garden for the past two years.



Cheryl and James Lawson plant an Abe Lincoln tomato plant in Linda Cramer's garden.

They also encourage the residents to get involved and found a shining star in one 14-year-old. "He has really taken to working the garden," says Cheryl. "He's out there learning about planting,



Residents help with weeding the garden.

harvesting and maintaining the garden." The 20 x 60 foot garden grows a variety of vegetables and the residents enjoy the harvest. During high volume harvest, excess tomatoes are boxed and shared with the community.

After visiting the garden a few times this summer, I noticed that rain barrels would really help with watering this large area. Early this fall, NRCS engineer Matt Robert contacted a friend at the local Kraft Foods plant and asked if they would like to donate a couple barrels which they gladly did. Then Robert converted two 60-gallon barrels into rain barrels. Robert and I delivered the barrels where Lawson and Mike Kingery, another Restoration employee, greeted us.

There was discussion on how they would install the barrels in their rain gutter system and agreed that the barrels would help solve several watering issues. After experiencing this year's drought," said Cramer, "having water stored for later use should prove to be a bonus--not to mention helping with the water bill."



(L to R) James Lawson, Matt Robert (NRCS engineer), and Mike Kingery talk over some ideas for setting up the rain barrels.

With some great local people and a few Abe Lincoln Heirloom tomato seeds, this People's Garden continues to be productive and has a promising future. This has been a fun project to be a part of and it really demonstrates just how much USDA can touch the lives of so many in a real and valuable way. I also saved some Abe Lincoln seeds and we'll do it again next year.

The Restoration Urban Ministries residents have planted several flower gardens on the grounds with plans to create more. These gardens vary with native plants and herbs to roses and lilies. The first flower garden was called the Heart Garden, named for the shape. The current vegetable garden is named the Hope Garden.

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