



Helping People...

...Help the Land.



Urban Garden Supports Community by Growing, Providing Free Healthy Food



Sara Stewart (L) discusses her operation with NRCS District Conservationist, Deb Knepp (R)



Unity Gardens grows a variety of plants, including kale seen here.



Sara Stewart tends to kale being grown in one of her raised beds.

It started with a simple idea. After spending six years working with the homeless population in South Bend, Indiana and teaching them about nutrition and wellness, Sara Stewart decided it was well past time to actually help them access healthy food.

As a public health nurse, Stewart had worked to teach them what to eat, how to care for themselves and administered health screenings to check for things like high blood pressure and diabetes. All while watching as the soup kitchen served canned vegetables, gravies and other food contrary to everything she was trying to teach.

Her initial plan was to make a small impact by planting a garden down by the docks where the homeless hung out. There, she and those she had worked with, could grow greens and vegetables while allowing people to pick what they needed to supplement their diets.

Armed with a few packs of seeds, she emailed five friends and invited them to bring a shovel and help her start planting. From that email blast, a movement began. In the 12 years since, one garden has turned into 40-60, spread throughout St. Joseph County depending on the year. The email list surpassed more than 1,000 by the end of the first year and has continued to grow.

The network of gardens is now known as Unity Gardens and includes a sprawling flagship garden in South Bend where they have based their operations since 2009. Placed between a Honeywell plant and a residential area, the garden is a pop of color in a sea of buildings and brick houses.

Stewart's idea of providing food to those in need has remained the foundation of Unity Gardens and sitting at the front of the garden, a yellow sign announces to all those who pass that they are invited to "pick for free." Behind the sign, brightly painted plots fill the space allowing them to grow a variety of food for the community. And dominating the left side of the garden is the mid-construction multi-purpose building, which will soon serve as meeting and classroom space. There, they will hold classes to teach people to cook



Arugula grown at Unity Gardens

healthy meals or plant their own gardens. It will also serve as a permanent store and center of operations for their flourishing summer camp and community outreach programs.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread throughout America and the world in 2020, people were left out of work, supply chains broke down and fresh food sometime became hard to find. Unity Gardens filled the gap and Stewart estimates they grew 200,000 pounds of food throughout the year and had more than 5,000 people visit the garden.

“This model is unprecedented, and yet it’s working,” Stewart said. “And as long as people value it, they’ll support it. So here we are, 12 years later, and it’s just as scary as it was on day one, maybe more so because I feel like I have a bigger responsibility. But I also have faith that I take one step in front of another, and I’ll continue to enjoy those serendipitous moments.”

Spring and summer growing seasons turned to fall and winter and the lush garden full of food and life has become empty plots that are being prepared for the next planting. The beehives that produce Unity Gardens’ award-winning “Honey from the Hood” have been closed for the season.

But no matter the season or the temperatures, growing never really stops at Unity Gardens. Hidden in the back corner of the property beside the two goats that call the place home, are four high tunnels that allow for year-round growing.

The outdoor plots are in a state of upheaval as maintenance is done and soil is nourished, but inside the high tunnels, life still flourishes. Kale, sorrel and mustard greens grow in the warm and humid spaces defying the near freezing temperatures outside that should have ended the growing season.

The area of the garden where the high tunnels reside is the commercial section. The plants grown there are taken to market and sold, which raises funds to keep the rest of the gardens throughout the county operating. Four-season growing is a key part of providing adequate food for commercial resale and in

recent years they have expanded from two high tunnels to four to enable efficient planting and crop rotations.

“If we have two greenhouses, they’re constantly in action,” Stewart said. “We’re using the soil. We’re using every piece of it. We’re growing food just to survive ... We would never have grown hot peppers, for instance, and hot peppers have been one of the single biggest things. The only reason we learn to grow potatoes well, is because of that fourth greenhouse.”

The third and fourth high tunnels were built in 2017 with help from the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service. The NRCS’ Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) provides cost-share assistance to urban farms like The Unity Gardens to build high tunnels, enabling them to increase their production capabilities.

Unity Gardens applied and was approved for two EQIP contracts in 2017. One of them was used to build the two hoop houses as well as a rock trench drain, which captures rainwater to be used for irrigation inside the high tunnels. The second contract funded a two-acre pollinator garden. Within the native plants growing there, honeybees and other insects that play a key role in pollinating the garden and helping the food grow flourish can be found.

The NRCS and the local Soil and Water Conservation District have also actively participated in field days and other education outreach initiatives at Unity Gardens.

“Without people like the NRCS, we couldn’t even survive,” Stewart said. “We wouldn’t grow the food well because there’d be no pollination or that kind of thing. So, one thing leads to another. And I really can’t underestimate how important it’s been.”

To learn more about Unity Gardens visit <https://www.theunitygardens.org/> and for more on EQIP and how it could help your operation visit <http://go.usa.gov/x7Q3H>.