

Building Community: Gardening Centers Educate and Boost Local Food Production

Discover how one nonprofit community gardening center in Wisconsin is teaching folks of all ages how to improve their health by growing their own food.

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By Paul Nicolaus



Flambeau River Community Growing Center (FRCGC) teaches residents of all ages how to garden. CEO Tony Thier first became involved while winding down from a 40-plus year career at the local paper mill.

Photo by Paul Nicolaus

“People are busy today, and everything’s so fast-paced,” explained avid gardener and retired teacher Dick Ross. “When you garden you can’t speed it up, and that’s the neat part. You go along with Mother Nature. You go back to basics.”

A lifelong educator who never gave up on teaching following his official departure from the profession, Ross seems to find just as much joy in nudging others to unearth the same sort of gardening benefits that he’s enjoyed over the years. “You have to experience it in order to understand it,” he said, “and it has to be cultivated.”

And nurturing a sense of curiosity about digging in and getting hands dirty is exactly what he and a variety of others have accomplished through a collaborative effort that has blossomed from seedling concept into full-blown organization dubbed the Flambeau River Community Growing Center (FRCGC).

The fledgling nonprofit located in the heart of Park Falls – a small town nestled within Wisconsin’s Northwoods – is an educational center designed to teach students and local community members of all ages how to garden so that knowledge absorbed along the way can be taken home and put to good use.

It is the result of efforts that have included plant scientists from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Flambeau River Papers mill employees, outreach staff from the University of Wisconsin-Extension, local educators and community volunteers.

The greenhouse and raised garden beds that now serve as the focal point of the FRCGC can be traced back to conversations that took place in the fall of 2012 when Tracey Snyder, a nurse practitioner hired by Flambeau River Papers to develop a company wellness program, explored options for improving the health and well-being of mill employees.

Early discussions involved Flambeau River Papers engineer Dave Wagner, who had recently identified steam waste within the mill’s operations, as well as Ross, who has been an active gardener for many years, first as a hobby and later through a family-run business called Flambeau View Greenhouse.

From there, Snyder reached out to UW-Madison Department of Horticulture student Mike Geiger to see if he knew of anyone who might be able to offer guidance. “As she explained that they wanted to use local food production to improve health and try to build community,” Geiger said, “I was thinking this all sounds like something I would be really interested in working on.”

Shortly thereafter, a core group met to discuss the possibilities, followed by several planning and brainstorming meetings. During this time, the prospect of using waste heat from the paper mill to warm a greenhouse came about for the first time. Realizing the next logical step would be to secure the necessary funding, Geiger networked with various individuals on campus, and when he spoke with Professor Sara Patterson (Department of Horticulture), she jumped aboard the endeavor.

“It was perfect timing,” Geiger noted. “We had just found this Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment proposal.” Through targeted financial support, the program is designed to foster public engagement and advance the Wisconsin Idea, which is the principle that the university should improve people’s lives beyond the classroom through teaching, research, outreach and public service.

After receiving the grant award in the summer of 2013, the greenhouse was constructed and the planting first began in the spring of 2014. Seedlings were grown and distributed to local school gardens, and a summer open house welcomed the local community and shared information about a series of workshops that included square foot and container gardening.

As plans were made to shut down once again in order to control disease, pests, and insects, give the volunteer crew a bit of a break, and save on the high energy costs associated with heating and lighting the facility during the heart of winter, efforts to establish the FRCGC as an official nonprofit organization were just heating up.

With the group’s desires in mind, Geiger made use of a Law & Entrepreneurship Clinic at UW-Madison that provides free legal services to hopeful entrepreneurs and early stage companies and nonprofits. Following an initial meeting in the fall, Geiger was later joined by Gail Huycke, community resource development educator with the Price County UW-Extension, at a follow-up meeting in early 2015.

One of the benefits of this nonprofit creation and the organizational development that goes along with it, noted Huycke, is that it will provide added structure once the current grant expires. With the creation of the board of directors, for example, efforts were made to include key partners as volunteers were welcomed in a more formal capacity.

During the most recent growing season, educational efforts kicked into high gear as local school districts became more heavily involved. Students from St. Anthony of Padua Catholic School were invited to the greenhouse, and the participants started seeds, watered, and helped maintain the seedlings that were eventually transplanted at the school garden.

Part of the excitement involved with this whole endeavor relates to the number of spin-off ideas and developments that have taken place. A case in point, said Huycke, is the creation of a hoop house that will be used to extend the growing season and supplement the St. Anthony school lunch program.

Plants raised in the Community Growing Center have been brought to the Chequamegon School District and its outdoor school garden as well, and a local 4-H group has allowed still other children to get involved. Area youth aren’t the only ones enjoying the new greenhouse and garden beds, however.

A Master Gardener course has made use of the facility, according to FRCGC CEO Tony Thier, who first became involved while winding down on a 40-plus year career at the mill. A local Friends of the Garden group consisting of roughly 30 members has helped with transplanting efforts, too, he added.

Looking ahead, the FRCGC leaders have plenty of ideas in mind. There are thoughts of composting in order to create their own soil, donating produce to a local food pantry, and expanding intergenerational programming.

Although the initial concept of warming the greenhouse using waste heat generated from the mill’s production processes hasn’t been completed just yet, circuits of PEX-tubing have been installed in the greenhouse’s foundation in order to provide a source of radiant heat through the flooring in case additional funding is secured and that option is pursued.

Many of the efforts moving forward will rely on expanding the existing volunteer base in order to ensure the organization’s sustainability, and as Ross noted, there is plenty of good to go around for those who do choose to get involved. “There’s harmony in this sort of thing,” he said. “Not just social harmony, but harmony with growing and harmony with the environment.”

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