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Parkland Pantry Produce Plot

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A with Honors Pantry Garden

In the fall of 2015 I had an idea to grow a garden for the Wesley Food Pantry @ Parkland. I spent several months formulating a plan with Theresa Meers, Horticulture Instructor. My goal was to feed 30 families who frequent the Parkland Pantry. I wanted to supplement with fresh produce, what the pantry was able to source from the Eastern Illinois Food Bank (EIFB). The EIFB mainly deals with shelf stable canned, boxed and bagged items. Fresh produce can be an expensive purchase at the grocery store, so many pantry clients will not eat fresh produce because of the cost. I wanted our pantry clients increase the consumption of more healthy food items such as fresh produce without impacting their budget.

Theresa allotted a space between the greenhouse and the automotive building to establish the garden. She assigned her students the task of figuring out how much of each vegetable should be planted to reach the goal of feeding 30 families.

We started by planting the summer crop on April 26th, 2016. That day we planted Yukon Gold and Kennebunk potatoes. On May 3rd, 2016, we planted 4 varieties of tomato, pepperoncini, jalapeno peppers, white and yellow onions, mesclun and endive lettuce, bush style beans and peas, zucchini, yellow squash and buttercup squash.

I spent the next 8 weeks coordinating volunteers to weed the garden. I also established a set time of 8:30 – 9:30 Saturday mornings when I would be at the garden to weed. Wesley Food Pantry put the word out on their Facebook page, and anyone who had free time could join me for a session of pulling weeds. I ended up with 7 volunteers, but without Parkland Sustainability Coordinator, Thor Peterson's help, the garden would have been overtaken with weeds.

I began to harvest on July 2nd. The first vegetable was zucchini. The zucchini's grew so fast, they were enormous, some were two feet long and 5" in diameter. I was harvesting twice a week to keep up. I estimate that in all I got 250 pounds of zucchini. The next vegetable to mature was sweet corn from the land lab, I got about 150 pounds. We had bad luck with the tomatoes this year, they were rotting on the vine before they got ripe. I may have gotten 30 pounds of tomatoes total. Although they didn't weigh much, I had the best luck with the pepperoncini's and jalapenos. As I said, I was harvesting twice a week in July and the beginning of August. Each time I went to the garden I got about ½ a plastic grocery bag of peppers. Not only did the peppers produce, but they produced consistently until the end of September. The most rewarding and fun harvest for me was the potatoes. It was fun to see one planted potato turn into 10 potatoes. The beans, peas, lettuce and buttercup squash failed. All in all, I was able to harvest about 450 – 500 pounds of vegetables during the summer.

The last week in August, we planted a fall crop of broccoli, lettuce, radishes, beets, and kale. I had nothing to harvest the first three weeks of October. The fourth week in October I harvested the beets because they were starting to pop out of the ground. They were quite small and I was able to get maybe 7 pounds. I had the best luck with the kale; I was able to get 4 kitchen bags (13 gallon). I got about one kitchen bag of lettuce. The radishes for the most part failed, I was able to get about 1 pound. Unfortunately, someone stole the broccoli, approximately 40 heads.

I decided to name the garden the Parkland Pantry Produce Plot. I coordinated with Dawn Longfellow, Operations at Wesley Food Pantry and graphic designer. She created a logo for the garden, which I would love to use on a sign near the garden. Perhaps the sign will help deter any future thieves.

I am already working with Theresa to plan next year's garden. I would like to establish both asparagus and rhubarb beds. I will be ordering the roots in the spring of 2017. It takes two or three years before the first crop can be harvested, but the beds will produce for up to 20 years. The pantry is moving in January to the M building. There is a patch of grass just outside the pantry door and I plan to start an herb garden in the spring.

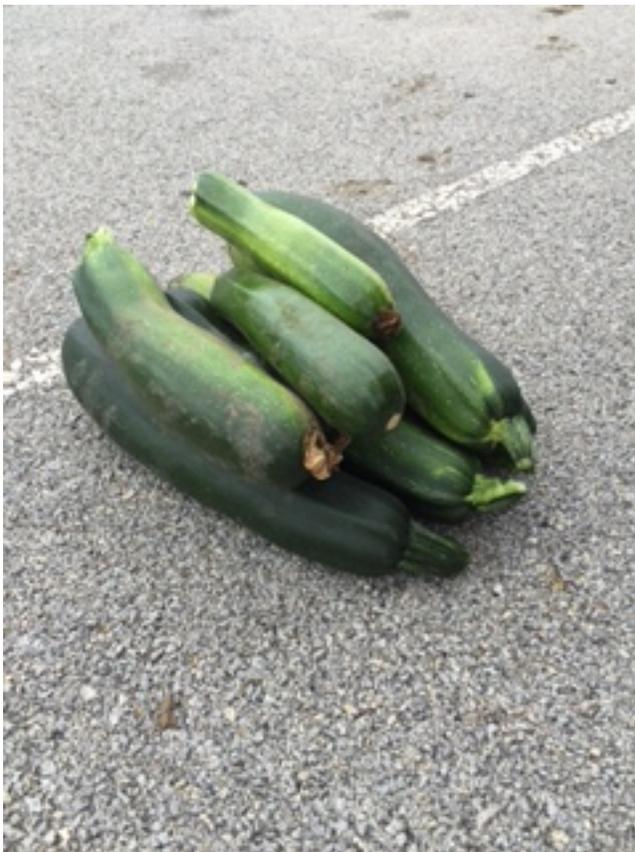
This was a very rewarding project. I got a kick out of seeing the pantry client's faces when I would show up with freshly picked produce. They looked at the produce as a treat, and they would give me tips on how they prepare some of the vegetables. One of the best ideas, which I passed on to other clients, was to use the peppers when preparing the canned beef. It was an easy solution to improving the taste. I also had some recipes for them; in case they didn't know how to use some of the vegetables. I look at this past summer as the beta year. We will improve our techniques, try some new crops, and hopefully double the amount of produce donated to the Wesley Food Pantry @ Parkland.



Planting the garden in May, 2016



The garden as it's growing



The first harvest



Harvest



Harvest including the potatoes



The first of the pepper crop



Harvest



Fall planting



Kale harvest



One of the corn harvests



I didn't write about this in my paper, but I contacted a spice distributor for a donation of spices to give to the pantry clients. This was a test to see if the clients would be interested, they were. I'm going to contact the distributor again for a follow up donation.



This is another project that I set up last year with the Hospitality Baking class. 3 times during the fall semester the class bakes for the pantry clients.