

Community Gardening Continues to Sprout in Shawnee County

Community gardening is increasingly popular in Shawnee County with new gardens planned in several parts of the county. To facilitate all the new gardens and gardeners, Shawnee County Extension, in partnership with Topeka Common Ground, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to assisting community gardens, is offering free Garden Training to the public on May 20 at the Extension Master Gardeners' Demonstration Vegetable Garden -- south of the Expo Centre parking lot, next to the locomotive -- from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. Topics covered will include composting and soils, fertilizing, food safety, mulching, pests, planting and transplanting, tool care, watering and weeding. To sign up for this free training, email brendajarboe@ksu.edu or calling 785-232-0062.

Shawnee County Extension Master Gardeners have plans in the works to start a new Demonstration Community Garden. A committee has been formed to move this project forward as swiftly as possible. It would be the hopes of the committee to first provide a place where volunteers can work a common plot to raise produce to donate to food pantries, with plans to later incorporate individual plots for members to raise their own produce.

As with any real estate, it is all about location, location, location. Like all gardens, the new Master Gardener Community Garden needs to have access to potable water, as only potable water should be used on edible plants. Contaminated water can be absorbed systemically through the roots of plants and cause food born illnesses, especially e. Coli. It is not advised to even use rain barrels to water edible plants.

Additionally, the location needs to be easily accessible. With a vast food desert in central and east Topeka, Extension Master Gardeners are hoping to place their garden on a bus line in central Topeka.

There are three types of community gardens. Some are church, school or community organization gardens and are entirely communal where all members work and harvest from a common plot. Others are neighborhood gardens consisting of individual plots where members tend and harvest from one or more of these individual plots, but there is no communal plot. Some community gardens are a hybrid of the communal and individual plots. This is the plan of the Shawnee County Extension Master Gardeners.

Every community garden is responsible for establishing the type of garden that best suits their needs, finding an appropriate site, planning garden layout, getting soil tested, drawing up garden operating rules and electing leadership. Things to consider are membership requirements, including costs; budget; size and type of plots – raised-bed gardening, inground plots, etc.; fencing; irrigation; whether to be organic, non-organic or a combination; restrictions on the use of commercial fertilizer, chemical pesticides and herbicides; limitations of certain invasive plants; types of plants allowed: ornamental or vegetable -- annuals, perennials and herbs; communal work requirements; disciplinary procedures; and numerous other considerations. It takes approximately 10 volunteers and a strong manager for a community garden to succeed.

Additional community gardens planned for Shawnee County are a WIC Garden at the Health Department and Church Gardens at Shawnee Heights Methodist Church and Unitarian Universalist Fellowship. Successful gardens currently operating around the city are: Crossroads Wesleyan, First Congregational Church, Grace Community Church, Hi-Crest Garden, Historic Old Town Topeka, I-Care Garden, KNI, LULAC, NetReach, TARC, VA, Vida Ministries, Williams Magnet School and three gardens through Topeka Housing Authority: Deer Creek, Pine Ridge and Echo Ridge. A map of the community gardens in Shawnee County is located at: <http://www.shawnee.k-state.edu/lawn-garden/CommunityGardening.html>.

Shawnee County Extension offers a two-part service for new community gardens. After a group of 10 or more volunteers agree to start a community garden Shawnee County Extension offers a presentation and basic overview on starting a community garden. The next step is more specific to that particular garden, offering recommendations and basic garden training. Shawnee County Extension also acts as a clearinghouse for persons interested in volunteering in a community garden or looking for a plot to garden.

Anyone with a garden plot who would like to support the community but is not affiliated with a community garden is encouraged to "Plant a Row for the Hungry" by simply growing an extra row of produce to donate to a local food pantry.

