






Griffith University Community Food Garden

Griffith University Logan Campus, Logan Central, Queensland

This project also relates to:

-  Community Harmony
-  Employment
-  Education

A community garden at Griffith University gives local refugee and migrant communities in Logan and Beaudesert the opportunity to increase self-reliance and have social interaction, thereby improving mental health and boosting their self-esteem. The project also aims to encourage learning about nutrition, to foster healthy eating habits and to involve the communities in physical activity to increase their fitness.

The garden offers an opportunity to newly arrived refugees and migrants to participate in familiar farming activities, grow traditional foods and develop a sense of being connected to their new community. Various communities work on the gardens together. They include students from Griffith University and members of the Burundian, Congolese, Sudanese and Pacific Islander communities.

Griffith University is working in close partnership with Assisting Collaborative Community Employment Support Services (ACCES Services) on this project. Other project partners are Multilink, Logan City Council and Queensland Health.

In 2008 the project will assist some of the gardeners, who are also ACCES Services clients, to develop employment skills with funding from a Community Jobs Project grant held by ACCES Services from the Queensland Department of Employment and Industrial Relations.

The project will build basic infrastructure so there is a shaded meeting place for the different communities that congregate and work in the garden. The meeting place will also provide a venue for life skills workshops such as food preparation and hygiene.

Identifying a need

ACCES Services had noticed that many of their refugee clients suffered from low self-esteem and depression. They also suffered from poor health, had poor nutrition and did not pursue enough exercise.

Griffith University in Brisbane contacted ACCES Services to express interest in using a community garden at the local campus in Logan as the basis of a community development activity for newly arrived refugees in early 2006. ACCES Services embraced the idea, believing that an outlet such as gardening could go some way to empowering individuals and helping them to become more self-reliant.

Consulting the communities

ACCES Services and Multilink staff promoted the project to their clients. The university held a barbecue with the refugees and migrants to show them the garden and introduce the idea of letting them use it. When they expressed interest and support, negotiations began. An informal arrangement was soon made and the refugees and migrants started to work in the garden.

The project

Griffith University provided funding through several community partnership grants, which covered setting up the garden site and purchasing tools, seeds and fertilisers. Overall responsibility for the Community Food Garden rests with Griffith University administration, and Queensland Health has funded a project officer to help run the project.

A steering committee has been established to guide the development of the garden. It includes representatives from Griffith University, ACCES Services, Multilink, the Queensland Department of Health, Community Renewals and Logan City Council, key academics associated with the project, a representative from the community reference group and a representative from among the students involved in the garden. The steering committee is responsible for developing strategic partnerships, sourcing funding and informing communities about the garden.



photo > Kabedi (at rear) and Altemon in the garden

From the beginning, the food garden included a space where Griffith University students from a range of disciplines, including public health, dietetics, nursing, human services, and environmental science could experience food production in a voluntary capacity. The student volunteers developed the garden in the early stages and worked with the refugees and migrants to set up garden structures such as garden beds, a herb spiral and composting bins.

Together, members of the African and Pacific Islander communities sow seeds, water the plants and harvest the produce from the organic community garden.

Celebrations are also held in the gardens. More experienced participants are encouraged to assist those with less knowledge and some now run sessions for other garden users on what to plant and when, watering and how to increase soil fertility.

Between 20 and 40 refugee families are involved in the garden at any one time. There is some turnover of participants in line with crop seasons and as a result of employment commitments.

A community reference group has been established with representatives from among those using the garden.

ACCES Services helps by sending their community development worker to meetings along with bicultural assistants to facilitate communication as needed. The reference group is responsible for day-to-day operations and provides a forum for garden members to discuss garden issues and make decisions about the project.

At the planning stage, the gardeners measure the garden and are allocated separate plots in an equitable way. The current garden site is 10 acres. Individuals are allocated 10 metre by five metre plots. They are able to cultivate whatever they please and many choose to grow traditional foods that are either not readily available or are expensive in Australia, such as okra, groundnuts, chillies, cowpeas and kidney beans. The next traditional crop to be planted is cassava, which is grown both in Pacific Island countries and in some African countries. They also grow a range of more common vegetables including corn, eggplants, cabbages, lettuce, onions and sunflowers.

Participants eat the produce they grow, share or trade it with other members of their communities (sometimes even those interstate), and at times even sell it if they have surplus. This assists in building participants' self-esteem, sense of achievement and status in the community as well as building relationships with other garden users from their own and other communities.

While implementing the project, a further need was identified to educate garden participants about nutrition and healthy living. The garden is being moved to another larger site that will also contain orchards to produce various fruits. Griffith University has obtained funding for materials to build a meeting place and a shaded area to deliver workshops and information sessions around life skills such as cooking, food preparation and food hygiene. The meeting place will be a site where garden participants can be encouraged in the use of conversational English. ACCES Services has also received a community jobs grant from the Queensland Department of Employment and Industrial Relations to provide the labour to develop the site and construct the new facilities.

Steering committee and community reference group meetings happen about every second month to plan, discuss and resolve issues and provide a forum to understand what is happening in the garden and what needs to be done.

Plans to develop a business focus

ACCES Services plans to link the community food garden to their business and social enterprise centre project to enable food to be sold commercially at a monthly market garden. A stall has been reserved at the market garden for community groups to sell their produce.

Achievements

The gardening participants have had a key role in making decisions about the garden, identifying resources required and taking ownership of the garden.

Growing their own food has enabled the refugees to save money and the vegetables have improved their nutrition and health.

Project participants have had opportunities to use their farming knowledge and this helped increase their self-confidence and overall wellbeing.

The refugees communicate with other communities in the garden using English as the only common language. This improves their communication skills in English, promotes integration and enhances social and life skills.

The project also facilitated interaction between refugee participants and Griffith University students. This has helped new arrivals improve their English conversation skills and has allowed the gardeners to be informed about adapting to the Australian way of life (for example, with information about when to use sunscreen and wear a hat).

Challenges

The biggest hurdle for the project has been insufficient funding.

The majority of participants are also looking for employment. Once they are employed, it is often difficult for them to continue their commitment to the garden.

Public transport between Woodridge and Griffith University's Logan Campus is very limited and, as a consequence, some people have been unable to attend. ACCES Services has, when possible, provided a bus service for gardeners, but as numbers increase this is becoming a more onerous commitment.

ACCES Services considered that for them, the project began very organically with no real management structure.

Implementing a more structured approach was challenging but has provided the necessary basis for the garden to function and grow. In the set-up phase of the project, a management committee would have been more effective than having one project officer.

Key factors in the project's success

Participants greatly appreciated the familiarity of gardening. ACCES Services project officer, Sam Takada, said:

People are coming to a new culture to see new things but gardening is something familiar. Refugees are used to it. Everything is new except for the garden.

A key factor was the close collaboration that developed between all project partners and the goodwill demonstrated by other Griffith University departments, particularly in relation to helping to manage the grounds of the garden.

Key messages and advice for setting up a similar project

It is important to recognise that refugees should take ownership of the garden and make their own decisions; something they may not have had the opportunity to do for a long time.

Many refugees have been farmers and are quite knowledgeable in this area. Therefore, refugee autonomy over the garden is crucial to the success of the project.

Transport needs to be factored into the project design to enable it to succeed.

The project also facilitated interaction between refugee participants and Griffith University students.

Funding

Funding was received from the Office of Community Partnerships of Griffith University, Population Health of Queensland Health, the Department of Employment and Industrial Relations, and the Logan City Council.

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Profile > Jerome

Jerome left Burundi in 1993 because of the war and fled to Tanzania with his family. In January 2006, Jerome, his wife Ncoka and their two boys came to Australia after having lived in refugee camps for 14 years. The family adapted quite well to the new environment.

Jerome and Ncoka initially heard of the gardening project through ACCES Services. He has actively participated in the project since May 2006 and was excited to plant the same vegetables here as he and Ncoka grew in Africa.

Jerome and his family have benefited from the garden in many ways. They saved money by eating their own produce and spent time together as a family, exercised and had the satisfaction of growing their own food.

Jerome and other participants have suggested how the project can be improved. They have identified the need for extra water, more space in the garden and fences to keep the animals out. Another identified need was the desire to grow more produce to be able to sell in the broader community.

Jerome said he and his family would highly recommend this project to other potential participants.