

Backyard Beginnings helps people know how to grow

Situation:

People want information about gardening ranging from how to get started to when to harvest. According to the National Gardening Association, the number of homes growing vegetables will jump more than 40 percent this year compared to two years ago.

Despite Natrona County's short growing season, interest in gardening has risen in recent years. In 2010, more than 50 participated in the first Backyard Beginnings program. Because of the popularity and demand, a second Backyard Beginnings program was offered in 2011, this time with a few changes. Additional instructors and three Master Gardener volunteers added expertise and hands-on activities not in the first-year program.

Students met once weekly for four weeks in April learning how to turn a backyard into a sustainable garden. Lessons included composting, fertilizing, soil testing, planting seeds, and how to prepare vegetables after harvest. Nutrition of fresh produce was also a component. Hands-on activities raised confidence and allowed participants to get their hands dirty. They planted vegetable seeds, which grew in the high tunnel, learned about worm composting, created their own mini-greenhouses, and learned how to make a root chamber. Class participants toured the community garden and learned about hoop houses, watering techniques, how to build raised beds, how to grow vegetables in a container garden, how to build a wind break, and how to plant seeds.

Additional workshops during summer taught weeding, troubleshooting, and harvesting. During the weeks in between, participants were encouraged to keep in touch with extension educators, Master Gardeners, and each other for comments, questions, and ideas.



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Impacts:

Forty-seven completed the initial four sessions, and 10 attended summer workshops. Pre-program questionnaires reflected an average score of 53 percent on the test section, while post-questionnaires reflected an average score of 98 percent – how much was learned between class one and four.

Confidence levels rose significantly. Initially, 48 percent felt confident growing their own vegetables. After the four initial classes, that number rose to 93 percent. Several class participants have rented community garden plots with im-

pressive harvests of a variety of vegetables including corn, pumpkin, carrots, and cucumbers, which are challenging for beginning gardeners.

Collaboration occurred among the three educators based in Natrona County and Master Gardeners and provided a greater variety of information presented to class members. Several indicated they will take the program again next year and will recommend it to friends and family. When asked what they like best about the classes, one participant said, “I loved the way a great group of teachers came together to present information.”

Additional comments:

- “This has been an excellent learning experience. I have never had a positive outcome from gardening attempts until now!”
- “This class was great! I’m growing spinach ... who knew!?”

Natrona County University of Wyoming Extension educators contributing to the development and delivery of Backyard Beginnings were Karla Case, Donna Cuin, and former educator Tom Heald, and Master Gardeners Thea True, Wendi Stull, and Lynn Dampman.