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Yarducopia - Growing Food and Building Community in the Far North Alaska Community Action On Toxics

Project Summary Part I. Description

Participating organizations

- Alaska Community Action on Toxics
- Native Village of Port Heiden
- Steller Secondary School
- Campbell Elementary School
- North Star Elementary School
- Catholic Social Services
- Benefe Equine Therapy

Background or problem statement

Alaskans import 95% of purchased food, and it is shipped through long supply chains from Mexico, Europe, Asia, and the Lower 48 states. Add to this the harmful chemicals and high use of fossil fuels that go into providing a conventional diet and Alaska is left with a highly unsustainable food system. Far from being quaint, a backyard garden can add needed fresh nutrients to the diet with a minimum of inputs, while encouraging a healthy, active lifestyle and facilitating community through Interest in food gardening is high, but many barriers exist. Access to land is one of them, especially for the more economically challenged, and demand for municipal community garden plots exceeds supply.

General description of the project

Our ambitious goal is to build a grassroots movement of organic gardeners in Alaska who will work toward a toxic-free, climate stable world. The basic Yarducopia model is to match a yard-owner with a person in need of garden space and build a 100 square foot sheet mulch garden with them, help them plant it and working with them throughout the season to learn to be a successful gardener in the challenging far north.

Gardeners also donate 10 percent of the produce to charity. For the 2016 and 2017 gardening seasons, we have worked with 40 unique yard owners, 50 unique gardeners, and 8 unique non-profits to build or rehab and plant 57 unique 100 square foot gardens. During this effort, we have worked with approximately 270 unique individuals, including yard owners, gardeners, non-profit staff, teachers, interns, volunteers, and school children.

Description of outcomes and follow-up

Yarducopia will continue as funding allows into the future. Our website is Yarducopia.org, and contains a sign-up form for the upcoming season as well as short how-to garden videos, a blog showing methods and achievements of the program, and advertising for upcoming events and classes. We created a cookbook for our gardeners for the vegetables we provided for the 2017 season to help introduce unfamiliar produce. This cookbook is on the website here:

<https://yarducopiadotorg.files.wordpress.com/2017/06/2017-yarducopiarecipe-book.pdf>

Project Summary

Part II. Analysis

Successes

Over the 2016 and 2017 gardening season, funded through this grant, 40 individuals (yard owners) have offered their yards and participated in Yarducopia. Fifty people seeking space to garden have been matched and gardened one of these yards as part of the Yarducopia program. A total of 8 non-profits had gardens built over the two years with Yarducopia. Not counting the non-profits we worked with, we have built 43 unique 100 sf sheet mulch gardens in the two seasons (2016 and 2017). We have also rehabbed and planted seven additional pre-existing garden spaces offered by yard owners. Including these gardens, and those we have built with non-profits, we have worked with 40 unique yard owners, 50 unique gardeners, and 8 unique nonprofits to build or rehab and plant 57 unique 100sf (or sometimes larger) gardens over the two years. During this effort, we have worked with approximately 270 unique individuals, including yard owners, gardeners, non-profit staff, teachers, interns, volunteers, and school children.

Over the two years, we created and nurtured more than 5,700 sf of active garden space, diverting more than 40 tons of local Anchorage horse manure, cardboard, and yard wastes from the waste stream and using it to build fertile gardens. We made over 120 teaching visits to our gardens during the growing season, helping participants produce about 2800 pounds of high quality, nutritious vegetables. Of that total, approximately 280 pounds was donated to charity. We also taught a series of beginning organic gardening workshops and intermediate level soil science, sheet mulching, forest gardening and hot composting classes. We made two trips to Port Heiden to successfully help the tribe establish a gardening program in a climate so challenging, even trees don't grow. We created a connected community of gardeners in Anchorage, drawing folks together for a welcome spring potluck, and harvest fall potluck, and a summer bike tour of gardens each of the two years.

Challenges

There are many challenges to a program of this type. In the actual gardening, there are vagaries of the seasonal weather, pests, and other logistical challenges. Working with a very large, diverse, and dispersed group of people poses its own logistical challenges. Probably the biggest real challenges for this program are financial sustainability and limits to growth. Tackling this last point first, by its open information model and ease of replicability, there is really no fundamental limit to the growth of the model among the population of interested gardeners. In theory, a website could be set up allowing people to match themselves up, and those with gardening knowledge could mentor those without. However, in practice, garden-matching websites have been set up like this with little interest. So a dedicated program or person to coordinate these efforts seems necessary for the results we have obtained. Given the experience of the last two years, about 30 gardens in private yards seem to be about the limit one coordinator (with intern and volunteer help) can manage to coordinate successfully in a season. Or work with gardens that are in a more centralized model – school, community, church, or non-profit gardens where many people garden together and one visit can touch many people. The Yarducopia model was developed to meet the hurdles to building more of these types of centralized gardens, and indeed in the time we have worked with others to vision new large scale school or community gardens and not yet seen them come to pass due to the administrative and coordination challenges, we have been successfully helping people grow food in private yards.

Lessons Learned

We feel like we have done a good job learning our lessons on this program. We have streamlined much of the administrative and garden building process purely through the experience of doing it over the last few years. As we look at the uncertain funding future for the program, we are trying to draw from our experience to determine if there are ways to supplement more of the cost of the program from user fees without pricing people out of wanting to participate. One lesson is that we may have reached fatigue on some of our gardening class subjects, as we repeated popular classes from last year but had much lower attendance this year, even having to cancel some for no interest. We have valuable information about follow on classes desired by the attendees from their course evaluations that we can use to plan new subjects, or we can work hard to reach new audiences for the information. So, advice to those doing this

type of work - a full-size pickup can hold enough manure or mulch to build about 200 sf of garden space, so load up, then schedule and build 2 100 sf gardens. Definitely use resources to automate and manage sign-ups for events and the program (we use Salsa). Also, collaboration is key - for instance, Catholic Social Services already has the translators, the space, the outreach and the connections to teach a soil health class to refugee gardeners.

What Next? What will you do and what should others do?

Yarducopia will continue to run this program based on available funding. Others can replicate it anywhere in the world, following the resources at Yarducopia.org, or by contacting Michelle Wilber.

For more information about the project please contact:

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