



By Kevin Robinson-Avila

COMMUNITY GARDENS FEED THE BODY AND THE SOUL

Ten-year-old David Leyva, who shares an apartment with seven brothers and sisters in Albuquerque's Trumbull neighborhood, was jolted awake one day last April by a tractor plowing up the vacant lot outside his bedroom window.

"I came out with my brothers to ask what they were doing," Leyva says. "They said they were planting a garden, and if we wanted to get involved we could. So I've been coming down every Wednesday afternoon since then to help out, because that's the day we all get together to work in the garden."

Dozens of children and adults from the neighborhood participate in the Trumbull community garden, which NMSU's Cooperative Extension Service started last April in cooperation with local organizations.

The garden, in the heart of Albuquerque's low-income Trumbull Village and La Mesa neighborhoods, aims to build community spirit and pride.

"Community gardens historically bring neighborhoods together and, in that sense, this project has worked like a charm," says Justin

Trager, coordinator for NMSU's 4-H Share/Care program at the Bernalillo County Extension office. "Residents from apartments and single-family homes around the plot are just coming out of the woodwork to step in and get involved."

The Trumbull garden is one of about 15 large community gardens that have taken root in urban and rural areas around the state, says George Dickerson, an Extension horticulture specialist who was appointed New Mexico community garden coordinator by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in 2000.

Community gardens spring up readily, but not many of them last. "These things come and go," Dickerson says. "It reflects the delicate balance between the goodwill needed to start a garden and the long-term community commitment needed to keep it going. Stable community gardens require continuous leadership and lasting dedication."

Dickerson says the 14-year-old Community Farm in Santa Fe, considered the state's most successful community garden, has survived because those critical elements are present. John Stephenson, a retired

TOMILEE TURNER



Sowing the seeds: Angelica Hernández, 8, helps her mother and sisters start a new family plot at the Trumbull community garden.

forest ranger, founded the 5-acre farm and orchard on his property with help from faith-based organizations that recruit hundreds of volunteers each year. The farm has donated about \$200,000 worth of produce to charity.

"This is a collective effort to improve people's lives," Stephenson says. "It's difficult, but we promote our project as a model for other communities."

Despite the difficulties, community gardens are growing because of



Rural and urban: Extension horticulture specialist George Dickerson, above left, and agricultural agent Patrick Torres consult with octogenarian John Stephenson on his 5-acre community farm in Santa Fe. Below: 7-year-old Alfredo Becerra helps 4-H Share/Care coordinator Justin Trager plant watermelons in the Trumbull community garden in Albuquerque.

their multiple social benefits. In Sandoval County, for example, Extension agricultural agent Rudy Benavidez assisted local nonprofits and pueblo governments in starting six gardens last year. Only two remain at Jemez Pueblo and Placitas.

Meanwhile, the San Diego Mission School runs the 3-acre Jemez garden as an educational tool for students.

“About 60 students grow corn,

chile and melons, and they donate the produce to tribe members,” Benavidez says. “The school wants to keep it going, because the kids love it and it’s a good educational opportunity for them. They learn about agriculture, and they get to feed pueblo people.”

Sometimes community gardens serve a different audience. For three years, NMSU’s Agricultural Science Center at Clovis ran a 10-acre com-

munity garden in partnership with the local detention center. The garden, proposed by Magistrate Judge Caleb Chandler, employed about 25 nonviolent offenders who worked off community service sentences in the garden, with all produce donated to charity. This year, the garden was moved to a local youth ranch, although science center staff continue to assist the project.

In Albuquerque, there are at least five other gardens besides the Trumbull garden, including projects promoted by the Department of Health’s Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program. WIC offers garden space, seed and tools for urban clients to grow their own food.

“The gardens are great development tools, because they provide food while allowing kids and adults to learn about nutrition and food production,” says Shawn Flanigan, a WIC employee who worked with the community gardening project.

The Trumbull garden, meanwhile, grew out of 4-H Share/Care, an after-school program for youth. Through Share/Care, hundreds of Albuquerque kids have helped grow vegetables at community centers, parks and elementary schools.

At Trumbull, children and adults work together to grow vegetables for their families. “It’s a great hands-on lesson for these kids, because they’re growing up in the city and most of them think vegetables just come from the grocery store,” says Pat Holmes of Albuquerque Weed and Seed, an Extension partner in the garden. “One of the boys wanted to plant eggs and cheese.”

The kids say they’re just having fun.

“I like to water the plants and watch them grow,” says Eddie Peralta, 7, who helped plant beans and corn in the Trumbull garden. “It’s really cool.”

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