

Community Mosaic Garden links people and plants in the Fox Valley

A new gardening project, literally growing in the University of Wisconsin-Fox Valley's own backyard, is opening a dialogue with the people who live and garden in the Fox Valley. The Community Mosaic Garden is created from the different cultures, plants and scientific knowledge that are shared in this place called home.

Cross-institutional grant provides funds

In 2003, the Community Gardens at the UW-Fox Valley were established to provide 35 rental gardening plots to area residents who might not otherwise have access to a piece of land for gardening. In 2006, the garden site was further enhanced by the addition of an educational garden, the Community Garden Mosaic, which was funded by a one-year grant from the UW Colleges and the UW-Extension Cross-Institutional Diversity and Multicultural Program. The collaborating partners in this effort are the UW-Fox Valley, UW-Extension in both Winnebago and Outagamie counties, Winnebago County Master Gardeners and Goodwill Industries of North Central Wisconsin.

Plants from around the world

In its inaugural growing season, five bermed garden beds were established by a group of 10 master gardeners to reflect horticultural/agricultural plants from Poland, Laos/Thailand, Latin America, Germany and Native American cultures. Susan Richardson, community garden coordinator at the northeast Wisconsin-based Community Garden Partnership, reports, "It also elevated the visibility of the richness of Community Gardens in the agrarian sense that food is central to all cultures and this is the common thread we can build on."

Outdoor classroom

These plantings provide UW-Fox Valley faculty and students, neighboring communities and schools with an outdoor classroom for the study of art, biology, sociology and other disciplines.

Signs explain the plants growing in the beds, and artistic mosaics greet visitors to the garden. UW-Fox Valley art professor Judith Baker worked with university students to create mosaic welcome signs, one in each of seven different world languages. The students researched the varied cultures to create mosaics that dynamically represent the given culture's people and traditions.

Expanding in size and involvement

Richardson expects the garden to keep growing in size and involvement by the community. The 2007 growing season will expand the Garden Mosaic to include plants from India and Turkey.

"Not unlike all gardens, this one needs a lot of support and nourishment to grow. We provide a place to teach and showcase the gardeners' skills. We don't want people to just go and look, we have to have active engagement," Richardson says.

Wisconsin Idea in action

The concept of "citizen science" is a critical component of the growing mosaic garden. According to Joy Perry, lecturer of biological sciences at UW-Fox Valley, the new garden is an example of the Wisconsin Idea in action. "Taking a degree program is not the only way to be educated. This is a more informal approach, like a 'self-serve' opportunity to learn about how other cultures use plants. We are creating something that is both beautiful and educational."

Open in May

The UW-Fox Valley Community Garden and the Community Garden Mosaic will open near the end of May.

For more information, contact Susan Richardson, community garden coordinator at the

Community Garden Partnership, (920) 832-2265 or Susan.richardson@ces.uwex.edu

Garden Mosaic impacts

The Garden Mosaic project integrates:

- Science: asking questions, observing, interviewing and recording data
- People: gardeners sharing their knowledge and experience with one another
- Cultures: learning about connections between plants, planting practices and cultures from all over the world
- Action: enhancing gardens, learning opportunities and neighborhoods

Of the 35 growing plots in the original community garden, several are rented by church groups who utilize the space solely to produce food for Plant a Row for the Hungry, a charitable program for stocking local food pantries with fresh produce.

Garden Mosaics is an international program founded by Cornell University. For more information or to access community gardeners' profiles from Wisconsin go to www.gardenmosaics.cornell.edu and look in the "i•m•science" section. The UW-Fox Valley gardeners' stories are grouped with fellow gardeners from the larger regional program under "Casaloma Garden".

By Gina Sanders Larsen, writer, university relations, UW-Fox Valley



More than 300 individuals visited the Garden Mosaic in 2006 as part of group tours. Many more individuals and families toured the gardens on their own.

Photo by Dave Hager, Director of University Relations, UW-Fox Valley