

The Blossoming of the Library Garden

How One Library Is Engaging Families Outdoors

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As twenty-first-century libraries create programming, they are finding innovative ways to engage children and families in lifelong learning through hands-on experiences.

Outdoor nature spaces and gardens at public libraries are ideal environments for both formal and informal learning. In underserved, urban communities where greenspace is limited, providing a learning garden as a resource is especially valuable.

Using Cuyahoga County Public Library's (CCPL's) Warrensville Heights (WVH) branch library as a case study, this article explores how a library in a low-income inner-ring suburb installed a children's garden that led to numerous positive impacts. In October 2015, Sari Feldman, then executive director of Cuyahoga County Public Library in suburban Cleveland, Ohio, approached the staff of the WVH branch with the idea of developing a children's garden at the branch. In Warrensville Heights, a community with a population of roughly thirteen thousand, many families live in apartments and lack access

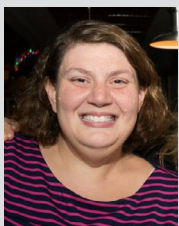


Harvesting the ripe vegetables that they helped to plant is a favorite activity for local children at the Warrensville Heights Branch of CCPL. Here Jaxon displays a sweet red pepper he has just picked.

to green space. The area is aptly described as a “food desert,” where residents have little access to fresh produce.

To set the initiative into motion, Feldman reached out to partner with the Cleveland Botanical Garden (CBG), whose director of school garden partnerships subsequently helped WVH develop a garden. In early 2016, they held a visioning session that was attended by residents and key community members including leadership from the city schools, the neighboring YMCA, two local hospitals, and the city of Warrensville itself. Attendees noted a desire for a peaceful green space, a place to physically play, and an opportunity to learn about food sourcing.

The CBG took these suggestions as the basis of a first-year plan for the garden, which was installed by both WVH and CBG staff. It was placed on the north side of the library



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A monarch butterfly sipping nectar from zinnias is a new and welcome sight for apartment-dwelling customers visiting the library garden at CCPL's Warrensville Heights Branch.

building in a grassy alcove, allowing for high visibility from the children's area, safety from the parking lot, and access to an exit door and a water spigot. Although the garden space is quite large—just over four thousand square feet—the initial plantings and recreation assets were modest. During the garden's first summer, in 2016, WVH and the CBG installed child-friendly features, which included three 3-by-3-foot raised beds for planting vegetables, along with hopscotch bricks and a sandbox. A large pre-existing bed of dying bushes was also replaced with perennial flowers and herbs. The total financial investment by CCPL's administration for the initial development and planting was \$4,000.

Support from library administration continued the following summer. In 2017, the library installed a gate because deer had discovered the garden in early spring. However, the gate is always kept unlocked and accessible to the public, even when the library is closed. Though staff continue to monitor activity in the garden, so far there have been few issues other than occasional littering in the space, a testament to the community's buy-in and respect for the garden.

Also, in the spring of 2017, the garden received generous financial support from two other sources. First, WVH was a recipient of the National Center for Families Learning (NCFLE)'s Let's Learn Together Outside (LLTO) grant. Branch staff were trained by NCFLE on family engagement techniques and the specific LLTO curriculum. The program prompted caregivers to engage their preschool-aged children with both nature and early literacy skills. After a meal, caregivers and children took part in separate activities. Children attended an interactive storytime, while caregivers were shown how nature can prompt open-ended conversation with children that leads to the further development of vocabulary and narrative skills. The groups then reunited outdoors in the garden

where caregivers could practice the tips they just learned. The program was successfully held in summer of 2017. The second source of funding came from a local donor, whose yearly financial support raised the Warrensville children's services budget from \$400 annually to close to \$2,000. Funds were used for physical improvement of the garden (soil, plants, tools) and garden-based programming. Additional raised beds were added to allow for a greater variety of vegetable crops. The monies also funded the LLTO program in subsequent years as well as outside guests for summer programming.

Marketing and Promotion

While programs are promoted through the library's website and seasonal program guide, in-person recruiting seems to work best in the Warrensville community. Families tend to access the internet via smartphone and do not necessarily visit the library website.

Many neighborhood children visit the library without adult caregivers and do not check paper program guides or pre-register for programs. This may explain the success of the weekly Garden Crafts program, which is not advertised, but rather relies upon the attendance of the branch's local children who utilize the library as a summer hang-out. Since it's not promoted, the program can have a flexible start time, aimed at times when most children are at the library and looking for something constructive to do.

Informal Learning and Family Engagement

Since its installation, the garden has generated enthusiasm and curiosity in youth. Popular nature and garden-based programs have included scavenger hunts, painting, photography, cooking, planting, and an annual Harvest Fest. Children's programs such as the Garden Crafts program are staff facilitated but encourage independent exploration.

Children who participate in this weekly program frequently enter the garden on their own to harvest vegetables, build sandcastles in the sandbox, make chalk drawings on the sidewalk, or turn cartwheels on the lawn.

Additionally, staff observed positive results when they introduced the garden to families who attended storytime and those who participated in the branch's Baby and Kindergarten Clubs. As the staff member leading Baby Club observed, "We relied on the garden to help very needy parents have joyful experiences with their children. They struggled in a traditional indoor setting, and the garden allowed the space, platform, and positive energy that they needed. We were able to do scavenger hunts, large bubbles, sand play, watering plants, and digging. These activities broke the ice and created joyful opportunities for parent engagement with their children."



Jacob is one of several teens who help keep CCPL's Warrensville Heights Branch garden watered and weeded. He and his friends report that they have started adding peppers, broccoli, and chives from the library garden to their ramen noodles.

Measurable Impacts

The positive impact of the WVH library garden can be seen through both anecdotal and measurable data.

Thanks to philanthropic funding since 2017, the WVH children's department has been able to greatly increase its STEAM programs. Monthly program statistics show an 82 percent increase in the number of nature and garden-based STEAM programs offered in the thirty months after the installation of the garden compared to thirty months before its installation, resulting in a 43 percent increase in STEAM program offerings overall.

Customer attendance in nature and garden-based STEAM programming has followed suit, increasing 70 percent in the thirty months after the installation of the garden compared to thirty months before its installation. This translates to a 35 percent increase in overall STEAM program attendance during that time period.

Maintenance

While many libraries with on-site gardens have installation and maintenance provided by outside community partners, at WVH, staff perform these duties. However, gardening experience varies among staff. Therefore, to assist with cross-training:

- A garden-experienced staff member created a user guide, including a map, plant information, maintenance tips, and program ideas.
- Garden programming was expanded to include the teen and adult departments. As a result, reference staff from



Taliyah is a frequent visitor in the youth department at CCPL's Warrensville Heights Branch, and is always eager to get involved in activities being offered. In the garden, she quickly fills a bowl with fresh broccoli and a green pepper.

these departments participated in seminars at the CBG and toured other community gardens throughout the city to gain gardening experience. The interdepartmental Garden with a Librarian program was created to allow staff to facilitate one evening per week of community interfacing with the garden. This multigenerational program will aim to include garden tours, games, free play for children, weeding and small maintenance tasks, harvesting, and food prep.

Looking Toward the Future

Library staff continue to grow in collective experience and seek ways to support and promote the garden as a valuable community asset. In summer 2020 when the pandemic halted in-person programming, staff constructed a StoryWalk that allowed families to participate in a literacy-based activity in a safe, socially distant way. As the vegetable crops ripened, customers were given bags to pick their own produce.

Staff are also working on post-pandemic plans to recruit a team of regularly scheduled volunteers to weed during the growing season as well as researching rain-catch irrigation systems.

We hope this history of the WVH garden will provide ideas and inspiration for other libraries who are considering adding on-site gardens as a way to promote customer engagement and life-long learning in their communities.

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