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to our community Guardians

Healthy Yankton Community Garden Is Growing!

Once the idea was planted, the Healthy Yankton Community Garden started growing. Now hoeing for the sixth year in a row, the garden has also helped to increase interest in gardening all across the community. The harvest has been bountiful and the rewards plentiful, reported HY representatives who agreed to report on their progress since the first soil was turned over.

The seeds of hope were abundant in the minds of Brenda Johnson, Nancy Teachout, Susan Thorson and Angie O'Connor back in 2008. The dedicated volunteers helped to propagate their plans into a rewarding reality...a patchwork of plots where residents get exercise, socialize, and make future nutritious meals materialize. Gardeners are even encouraged to 'grow a row' to donate their excess produce to others in need.

"A start-up grant from the Department of Health and additional financial support from Avera Health helped HY patch plans into place," said Angie O'Connor, of Avera Sacred Heart Wellness Center.

In collaboration with the Dogs-R-Us 4-H Club, HY sought and gained support from Yankton City Parks and Recreation Director, Todd Larson. Larson and the other representatives received overwhelming support from the Yankton City Commission and, oh, how the dog park and garden did start to grow in 2009! Tilling land in Yankton's backyard, Marne Creek West Park provided the perfect place for garden plots. Today, Healthy Yankton shares a parking lot with the dog lovers, along Yankton's West City Limits Road.

There have been so many people all across the community who have provided fertile ground that yields success for the Community Garden. Mark Hunhoff of Mark's Machinery readily digs in to donate his time, equipment, fuel, and expertise to work the soil each spring and fall. Hunhoff recruited Tony Ellis, who also offered his services and assistance in the early years.

"Gardeners are required to pre-register and pre-pay to obtain approval to plant, weed, monitor, and clean up their designated garden plot after harvesting a bountiful crop for their personal use. Individual garden plots are approximately 12'X18' in size and there are 221 plots available for planting. With only a \$20 per plot fee, gardeners are excited to take a bite out of their grocery bills by growing their own produce. Gardening continues from mid-April to mid-October, depending on the weather," stated Sr. Julie Peak, OSB, who serves as the current President of the HY group, explaining the current process.

One big task each spring is plotting where gardeners will plant. Over the years assistance in marking the garden has come from the Mount Marty College Men's Basketball Team, then under the guidance of Coach Jim Thorson and with support from his wife Susan Thorson, who serves as MMC's Director of Health Services. Inmates at the Yankton Minimum Unit of Mike Dufree State Prison also helped create whimsical garden markers that initially provided country appeal. Practicality required a transition to more durable garden markers.

What goes in must come out so another big task is garden clean-up each fall. The support by members of the HY group has been supplemented by the dedicated and hardworking City Parks and Recreation staff. Coordination between the city staff has been supported by Brittany Orr, Recreation Coordinator, who along with Laura Larson, community member, remain as active members of the HY group.

HY Secretary and Master Gardener Cindy Nelsen brought her fellow plant masters to the plots to provide growing guidance for gardeners. Like a friendly farmer, the Master Gardeners make themselves available at the garden site, offering wise words about dealing with worms, encouragement for eco-friendly approaches, and praise for those proud of their produce. Nelson researched rodent eradication and promoted production of the owl houses that were prepared by former leaders and members of the Dogs-R-Us 4-H Club. Placed at the Community Garden and other Yankton Parks, the boxes encourage nesting by owls to feed on rodents, avoiding chemical eradication.

The HY group took root by cultivating partnerships within the community. As

the number of gardeners grew, so did the amenities at the garden. A few years back water access was added in cooperation with the City of Yankton. Raised bed gardens were added just last year, with funding provided by a grant from HyVee. A large sign at the entrance, picnic tables, and covered message boards, were added in cooperation with the City Park. The Master Gardeners planted several flower boxes.

Even before the HY Community Garden was tilled, the Healthy Yankton group had deep roots within the community. The group stopped traffic to promote the first walk across the upper deck of the US Highway 81 Meridian Bridge in 2006. A Winter Fest had been held annually to encourage active and healthy lifestyles, even during the coldest days of South Dakota winters. HY teamed up with Yankton County 4-H to get pups and their pet-parents walking around the Fantle Memorial Park. The HY group was honored as past Yankton's Volunteers of the Month, February 2012, for their commitment to cultivating the Community Garden. Television stations, radio reports, and regular newspaper coverage have provided a media greenhouse for spreading the news about the HY Community Garden.

Planting ideas for improvement opportunities continues to grow, proving that the Healthy Yankton Community Garden has grown with the support of the community. While no one can predict the future, the idea for a Community Garden fell on fertile ground, has been carefully cultivated, and continues to produce a place that helps the HY Mission grow, "The Healthy Yankton group encourages lifelong, healthy, active lifestyles by providing education, support and opportunities for individuals and groups in the Yankton area to improve or maintain their health."

■Angie O'Connor

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