

## **Project title: Shawnee County Community Garden Network**

The benefits of community gardens are many—access to healthier foods and better nutrition, physical activity, improved mental health, community engagement, preservation of the environment, education both for youth and adults, crime prevention, improved family finances and economic development.

Here in Topeka and Shawnee County, the number of school and community gardens is increasing but no organized network exists among community agencies, faith-based organizations, schools, and public and private entities to share knowledge and skills, and leverage resources. In addition, K-State Research and Extension-Shawnee County and Topeka Common Ground, a volunteer community garden organization, are overwhelmed with the requests for help with new school and community garden projects.

On March 15, 2014, K-State Research and Extension-Shawnee County and Topeka Common Ground hosted a garden networking meeting to gauge interest in forming and recruiting interested parties into an organized community garden network.

Those in attendance included:

- a. An apartment Owner with vacant lot
- b. Washburn-Rural School District and HyVee Grocery store partnering on a garden project
- c. Silverbacks-a community volunteer organization
- d. Shawnee County Master Gardeners
- e. Keep America Beautiful working on a project at Topeka Rescue Mission
- f. Girl Scouts interested in a garden at Robinson Middle School
- g. NET Reach/Avondale East-a neighborhood empowerment and transformation agency in a high-risk area of Topeka
- h. Chesney, Hi-Crest and Ward-Meade garden volunteers
- i. Washburn University AmeriCorps VISTA Fellows
- j. Chase Middle School garden site coordinator
- k. Trash Mountain Aquaponics Project
- l. Wakarusa Presbyterian Church

By the end of the meeting, attendees agreed to organize into a network to accomplish the following goals:

1. Survey and develop a map of all community gardens in Shawnee County.
2. Recruit more members and increase public awareness of community gardens.

3. Expand communication venues to include a list serve, website with calendar of events and activities, and social media to connect members and interested parties with resources.
4. Provide and also support educational opportunities for training volunteers on community garden best practices.
5. Support expanding community gardens in schools and the community, especially in food desert areas of Shawnee County through ongoing education, advocacy and leadership development.
6. Assist community gardens with becoming self-sustaining and encourage donation of excess produce to emergency food centers.

**Timeline for activities—March 2014 to December 2015:**

March, 2014: Developed initial list serve, begin researching funding opportunities.

April, 2014: Hold second network meeting, schedule future meetings, begin surveying and mapping of community gardens, begin updating and expanding websites and social media, plan future trainings. Begin discussion with Heartland Healthy Neighborhoods Coalition to develop a Shawnee County Food Policy Council. <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Heartland-Healthy-Neighborhoods>.

May, 2014: Provide first community garden training, connect members to other training opportunities.

July, 2014: Send members to Kansas Community Garden Conference.

Late Summer/Fall 2014: Offer food preparation and preservation classes. Offer community garden tours.

October, 2014: Hold open house in celebration of Food Day and showcase accomplishments and future plans of Shawnee County Community Garden Network.

December 2014: Plan activities for 2015.

Spring/Summer 2015: Continue training, send volunteers to state garden trainings, and connect volunteers with resources.

Fall 2015: Offer food preparation and preservation classes. Hold Food Day 2015 Celebration

December 2015: Plan activities for 2016. Move network into Shawnee County Food Policy Council.

**Accomplishment Benchmarks:**

1. Communication network is operational and routinely updated with events and resources.
2. Volunteers are attending meetings and educational trainings.
3. At least five new community gardens are launched in 2015.

**Collaborative Partners:**

- Lisa J. Martin, MPH, RD, LD--Expanded Food and Nutrition Education Program, K-State Research and Extension-Shawnee County
  - Role: Principle investigator; network coordinator; fruit and vegetable food safety, preparation and preservation education.
- Jamie Hancock, Horticulture Agent-K-State Research & Extension-Shawnee County
  - Role: Horticulture education and coordination of Master Gardeners involved in community garden education
- Rosemary Menninger—Topeka Common Ground
  - Role: Education, recruitment and leadership development of community garden volunteers.

**Potential impact for all collaborative parties:**

1. New leaders are trained to meet the increasing requests for assistance for new and expanding community garden projects.
2. New audiences are reached with educational programming, especially underserved audiences.
3. The local food system is strengthened, especially in areas of food deserts with limited access to healthier food choices.
4. Neighborhoods and communities are strengthened through positive interactions.
5. Shawnee County Community Garden Network becomes an integral part in the Shawnee County Food Policy Council.

**Amount of Funding Requested for Shawnee County Community Garden Network: \$6000.00**  
**No matching funds.**