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UNIVERSITY

KNOWLEDGE MOBILIZATION

PLANTING SEEDS OF COMMUNITY INCLUSION

A participatory action community gardening study and horticultural therapy group intervention for seniors at Mount Royal University.

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Community gardens have been found to contribute to a number of health, social and ecological benefits. Revitalizing the MRU community garden, which has been underutilized in the summer session at the university, to include neighboring seniors and community volunteers was seen by a group of interdisciplinary researchers as one way to revitalize individual and community health.

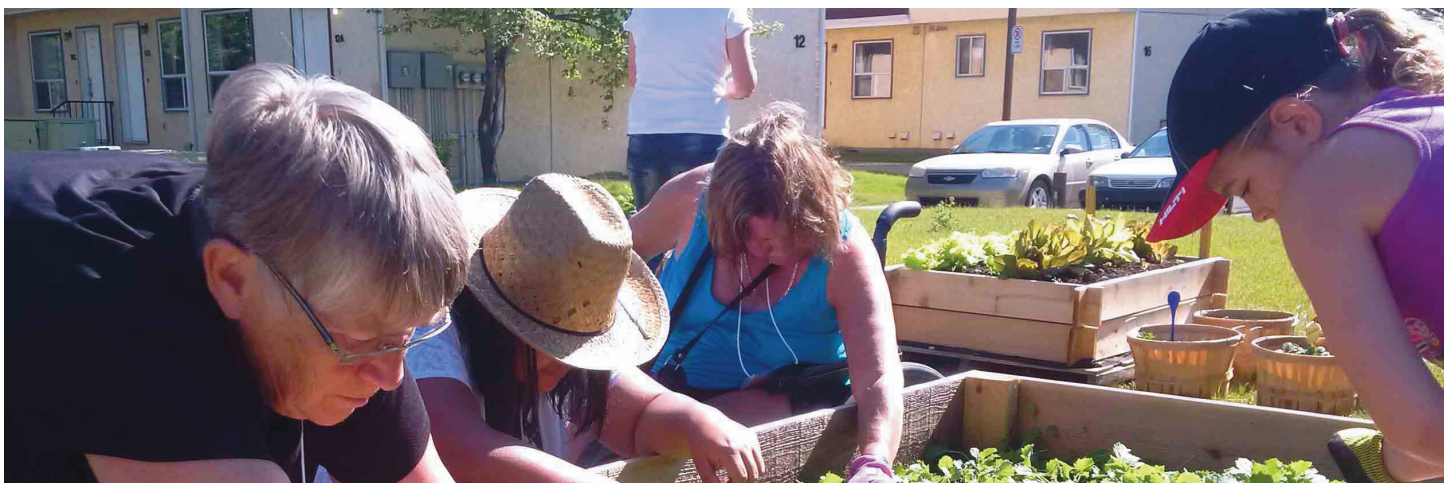
Guided by eco-health and permaculture principles, a participatory action research project was undertaken to explore an inclusive group horticultural therapy program for neighboring seniors groups and community volunteers. Specifically, experiences of inclusion in the garden as well as barriers and benefits to participation were studied during the 2015 project.



Methodology

THE STUDY INCLUDED:

- 8 community health nursing students (+1 instructor)
- 7 researchers from 3 disciplines (nursing, psychology and child studies)
- 5 research participants (from 3 seniors residential facilities)
- 5 community volunteers (2 professional care giver, 1 senior, 1 adolescent, 1 child)
- 4 mixed ability community gardeners from the neighborhood
- 2 research collaborators/facilitators (our horticultural therapist and MRU sustainability liaison)
- 1 research assistant



Findings

EXPERIENCES THAT STOOD OUT IN ALL ASPECTS OF THE PROJECT:

- Importance of a structured program - but one with no day-to-day “agenda”
- Value of routines - but accommodating
- Strength in allowing participants of all ages and abilities to bring their assets and strengths – compassion and embracing of differences
- Allowing people to have choices and a say in all aspects of the project and program



BENEFITS FOR PARTICIPANTS:

- All domains of well-being (cognitive, physical, emotional, spiritual/creative, and especially social) saw benefits from the inclusive community gardening program
- Inclusion provided an outlet for participants’ interest in gardening, particularly through structured and free time gardening activities, sharing food and to-go garden and garden products, such as preserves, produce or windowsill herb.
- Participation provided a place to be visible, recognized, to contribute and be useful.
- The process and garden place reduced tension about the expectations of participating in social activities.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BENEFITS:

- Shifting values/ approaches
- Creating accessible community spaces
- Reorienting from individual to community

Implications

We have discovered that a structured, but highly responsive and flexible, horticultural therapy program was a place of germination for inclusion and sustainable community development. There were benefits to well-being in several domains (cognitive, physical, emotional, spiritual/creative and especially social) for all involved in extending our campus community out to the surrounding communities through inclusive gardening. In particular, the intergenerational and mixed abilities aspects of the pilot project stood out as valuable to all.

Where From Here?

The pilot project has planted the seeds for sustainability and future growth. It has extended campus-community relationships, particularly with seniors’ groups, but also with children, youth, and disability community members who see a place for themselves as part of the campus community. One of the community partners has extended the relationship, inviting the participants and researchers to the seniors’ care facility to continue the celebration of the project. The project has re-imagined personal and institutional possibilities.

Future extension projects are proposed to further develop the project work and inclusive horticultural therapy program with two new populations: intergenerational (including seniors and MRU’s daycare) as well as a mixed abilities group of gardeners. ■

FUNDER RECOGNITION

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- MRU’s Faculty of Health, Community & Education Innovation Fund