



University of Texas Austin, Texas Farming/Gardening

SCHOOL

University of Texas at Austin, Public, 4 year university, 50,000 students, Austin, Texas

ABSTRACT

The UT Concho Community Garden is the first community garden on our university campus. The garden provides students, faculty, and staff the opportunity to garden, learn and share knowledge about food production, pursue sustainability-minded projects, and participate in free classes and events. Food at our garden is grown for individual consumption, for use in UT dining halls, for donation, and in the future, to supply an on-campus garden stand.



GOALS AND OUTCOMES

Goals

We hoped the UT Concho Community Garden would provide a vibrant and active space on our university campus where we could educate volunteers and participants about gardening and food production, build community, produce ample harvests, and pursue sustainability-minded projects. Moreover, we hoped the garden would inspire greater awareness throughout our university community in topics concerning the environmental and social impacts of food production.

Immediate goals included successfully constructing and operating the university's first community garden. Publicity was and is a constant aspect of the project, as we're interested in exposing and attracting the greatest number of people to our project. We continually seek ways for the project to cater to numerous individuals with varying interests, and encourage people to invest their talents and propose their ideas to contribute to the positive development of the garden.

Goals for the next 2-3 years include maximizing the potential of our current site (both in terms of harvest and community participation) as well as expanding to create the university's first micro-farm. We hope to grow enough to provide an ample supply of produce to our university dining halls, for donation, and to supply an on-campus garden stand.

Accomplishments and Outcomes

We successfully completed our initial goals for the project! In Spring 2011, over the course of three large volunteer workdays and regular weekly work times thereafter, we constructed the garden. The garden encompasses 6500 square feet (about 1/7 of an acre), and includes 28 plots, 5 fruit trees, and additional landscaped areas featuring native Central Texas plants. Plots include 19 4'x8' plots assigned to

individuals (students, staff, or faculty of UT) and renewed on a semesterly basis, 3 4'x8' demonstration beds, 3 10'x10' student organization plots, and 3 4'x16' plots run by a team of UT chefs and where all produce grown is served in UT dining halls.

We have successfully established partnerships to ensure long-term success and investment in the garden. This includes departments within UT, including the UT Office of Sustainability, UT Landscaping Services, UT Division of Housing and Food Service, UT Wellness Network, and the UT Child Development Center, as well as a number of student organizations, including the Campus Environmental Center, Engineers for a Sustainable World, Slow Food UT, Students for Undergraduate Research Opportunities (SURGe), and Culinary Chops. Our garden has become a part of the city-wide Coalition of Austin Community Gardens.

Our garden transformed a previously vacant lot (in a sea of parking lots) into a green oasis on the east edge of our campus. Weekly work times and free events bring new faces as well as regular participants to the garden and have created a unique place on campus where people can interact and connect. The garden is a Certified Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation. In relation to the monumental size and acreage of our campus, the garden is miniscule, but its potential educational impact is vast. And with the soon-to-be expansion, we may begin to physically impact in a measureable way reduced carbon dioxide emissions attributed to our campus by supplying local, organic food grown by students to our university dining halls.

Challenges and Responses

We've been lucky to have so much support (financial, material, and inspirational) from our main partners at UT (UT Campus Environmental Center, UT Office of Sustainability, and UT Division of Housing and Food Service). Initially the idea of a community garden wasn't enthusiastically received, as it had no precedent on our campus. We learned to keep the dialogue going, and that talking to the right person (in a position of power) makes all the difference. Once that obstacle was hurdled, the next step was dealing with bureaucracy. Initial strides in getting the project through all approvals took the better part of a year. Soil testing and remediation took a particularly long time, given the layers of bureaucracy involved. We responded to these challenges with patience, and good, persistent communication coming from our end.

The physical implementation of the project went quite smoothly. The Campus Environmental Center was able to support 2 student employees (Project Coordinator and Project Assistant) in the Spring 2011 semester (continuing into Summer 2011) to coordinate the garden and organize volunteers. This Fall, three student employees will work on the project. Invested, reliable project coordinators are extremely important to the success of the project.

Campus Climate Action: Your School's Carbon Footprint

Our project addresses global climate change in an indirect way, in that we educate volunteers and participants of the garden about the benefits of local, organic farming, one of those benefits being significantly reduced carbon dioxide emissions. Additionally, we hope to make a more physical impact on the reduction of CO2 emissions attributed to our university with our project's expansion.

Commentary and Reflection

Pursuing this project has been one of my most significant and rewarding college experiences. Coordinating the project while being a full-time student was and is a challenge, but one that's well worth

it. The community garden has already allowed so many people to connect, so many good ideas to be shared and pursued, and has really created a solid and engaging community focused on a common goal.

ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

Leaders and Supporters

The UT Concho Community Garden is an ongoing collaboration between the UT Campus Environmental Center (a student organization), the UT Office of Sustainability, and the UT Division of Housing and Food Service. A number of UT departments and student organizations also support and are invested in the project.

Funding and Resources

Funding for this project came from a variety of sources, including through university funding, external grants (including a NWF Campus Ecology Fellowship), and plot payments from garden members. In the future, we plan to also fundraise through selling produce, and seek funding from the recently instated Green Fee at our university.

Education and Community Outreach

Thus far our outreach efforts have mainly existed in the online realm. We maintain a blog (www.utgardening.blogspot.com) and Facebook page (UT Concho Community Garden). We send weekly emails to our listserv. We register volunteer opportunities at the garden with the university-wide calendar Know Events, as well as with our university's Volunteer and Service Learning Center. At the beginning of the semester, we email school advisors information about our project that they can forward to their student base. We plan to extend our outreach efforts this upcoming Fall to include regular tabling on campus.

Regarding community outreach, our garden participates in the Coalition of Austin Community Gardens, including their annual city-wide community garden tour. We also have been in contact with the neighborhood association in which our garden resides, and welcome neighborhood residents to be involved at the garden.

Educational efforts at our garden take effect through weekly work times, free classes, and events. When we begin tabling on campus this Fall, we will bring our garden to those that wouldn't necessarily have sought it out. Hopefully our display will attract additional interest from our university community, and encourage people to visit the garden and learn firsthand.

National Wildlife Federation's Campus Ecology Program

A NWF Campus Ecology Fellowship was awarded in support of this project last Spring 2011.

Bi-monthly conference calls have been useful in gaining perspective on the variety of student-led projects happening across the nation. It has been extremely interesting learning the challenges experienced and achievements won by other Fellows, and comparing them to our own project.

Having National Wildlife Federation associated with our project makes it more easily and readily understood as something part of a greater whole. It connects our garden with the many projects happening across the nation, that cumulatively have an even greater impact in bettering our environment and the communities in which we live.

CONTACT INFORMATION

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MORE ABOUT YOUR SCHOOL

Campus Sustainability History

The UT Campus Environmental Center, now the largest student environmental organization on campus, was founded in 2002 thanks to a grant from the National Wildlife Federation Campus Ecology Program. In recent years the University of Texas at Austin has progressed in addressing its environmental impact through a host of environmental initiatives. These initiatives include educating about and incentivizing environmentally friendly transportation to campus, constructing LEED certified buildings on campus (Silver Rating minimum), implementing a campus-wide recycling program (which had previously been organized and run by students through CEC), approving an official sustainability policy, and initiating a composting program in UT dining halls. The University created the President's Sustainability Steering Committee in 2007, and hired its first Director of Sustainability in 2009. UT Austin has been a member of the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) since 2008, participates in the Sustainability Tracking Assessment and Rating System (STARS) as a pilot member, and continues to receive high marks on the Green Report Card. In March 2010, students approved a new green fee to support environmental projects and scholarships on campus. See <http://www.utexas.edu/sustainability/> for more information.

Image credit: Daniella Lewis