“Help and Harvest!” Recruiting and managing campus garden volunteers

Joy Fritschle
West Chester University of Pennsylvania, jfritschle@wcupa.edu

Joan Welch
West Chester University of Pennsylvania, jwelch@wcupa.edu

Heather Sowers
West Chester University of Pennsylvania

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“Help and Harvest!” Recruiting and managing campus garden volunteers
Dr. Joy Fritschle, Dr. Joan Welch, and Heather Sowers
Departments of Geography & Planning and Graduate Social Work, West Chester University

ABSTRACT

Through the initiative of one Honors course, Sustainability Through the Lens of Agriculture, West Chester University has planted and maintained a campus garden since 2002. To provide useful life-long skills, students learned how to plan, design and plant a garden. The initial garden location was not accessible to the campus community. Most did not know it existed except for the groundhog that volunteered to take care of harvesting!

Awareness of the benefits of outdoor education brought us a new, high traffic location on main campus in 2010. In summer 2010, a faculty member volunteered her time to maintain the garden. Challenges included finding volunteers, orienting them to the watering and weeding (is that a weed?) and harvesting (is it ripe yet?).

In the spring of 2011, the same Honors class doubled the garden space by building six new raised beds and one double-dug asparagus bed. The University also provided a modicum of funds to hire a student intern who embarked on a volunteer campaign called “Help and Harvest!” This addressed two issues: volunteers to weed and water the garden and people to eat the produce. This program reduced wasted produce in the garden significantly from the past season. At least 75% of our summer volunteers were university staff who, unlike faculty and students, are present on campus all year. Involving staff, especially those who work in buildings near the garden site, is key to maintaining a university garden in the summer.

This year our intern is strengthening the overall garden program by focusing on fall and early spring crops that can be grown and harvested during the academic year and utilizing social media to recruit more student volunteers. The overall best volunteer recruitment strategy, however, is simply talking to passersby and giving them a tour of the garden!

We need YOU to be a garden volunteer!

Contact Andrew M. Lloyd, garden intern: AL721719@wcupa.edu