GFO Case Study

Harrisburg Home Gardens

Growing Community in Augusta, GA

It began in 2015 with a bit of nostalgia, offered in passing, by customers shopping at Veggie Park Farmers Market, a weekly market held near downtown Augusta by the non-profit, Augusta Locally Grown (ALG). Customers were reminiscing about their childhood days when they ate the bounty of food grown in their back-yards. “Wouldn’t it be nice if everyone could have a garden, the way we did back then?” This casual exchange would go on to inspire the creation of Harrisburg Home Gardens (HHG).

Kim Hines, Executive Director of ALG, knew from experience working at a therapeutic farm in Massachusetts that gardens offer a multitude of benefits to those who tend them, both in terms of mental health and dietary outcomes. She also knew the native soil in urban Augusta was contaminated with heavy metals from its industrial past-life, so raised bed gardening was a must.

At the time Hines and a close partner, Marsha Jones at St. Luke’s United Methodist Church, had co-founded G.R.O.W. Harrisburg--a neighborhood coalition that means 'Growing R Own Wellness'. With two years of gardening at St. Luke’s, and two seasons at Veggie Park Market under their belts, they were preparing to launch a 'Produce Prescription Program' and saw an opportunity to facilitate personal growing experiences with residents.

“A community is healthiest when it can feed itself.”

Kim Hines,
Founder
Augusta Locally Grown

Ms. Jenny in her Harrisburg Home Garden.
Photo credit: Augusta Locally Grown
As the garden experts in the coalition, ALG started the first home garden by recruiting a family active in G.R.O.W. Harrisburg—cautious as they explored a new initiative. One family quickly grew into six families so that soon ALG was organizing a steady crew of volunteers to build and install 4x4x10 raised-beds. ALG delivered beds with soil, plant starts, and gardening lessons—all free-of-charge—to support each garden’s successful start.

Details about HHG spreads primarily by word of mouth, residents put in a request by phone or in person to ALG or St. Luke’s staff. On average three beds are installed per home, but the number of beds is limited only by the size of the yard. The largest home garden installed twelve beds, and a few gardens are shared between two households.

As HHG took off in 2015, ALG set an ambitious goal of installing 100 raised-beds, not expecting to surpass this goal in less than ten months. By the summer of 2016 Harrisburg was abuzz with excitement as gardeners competed for best tomato harvests, and eagerly swapped produce and recipes. By the winter of 2018 220 raised-beds filled Harrisburg yards, with expansion gardens at schools, churches, and businesses in the neighborhood.

As the project’s popularity grows, so has interest from outside of Harrisburg. For example faith-based leaders at Trinity on the Hill, Reed Memorial Presbyterian, and Bible Deliverance Temple installed ALG gardens. The local Health Department in an adjacent neighborhood, Laney Walker, installed two raised-bed gardens flanking the sides of their office. This led to Georgia’s Department of Public Health granting ALG funding to lead SNAP-Education and community gardening in their health district, a portion of which supports HHG.

“The goal is to get people to grow their own food and be more self-sustaining. Most families have a good harvest—turnips, kale, mustard and collard greens, sweet potatoes, tomatoes, broccoli.”

-Robert Sims, Harrisburg neighbor, FoodCorps servicemember, and first HHG coordinator.
Five years later that bit of passing nostalgia rings true today--home gardens are an affordable way for residents to eat more fresh food. As Kim Hines likes to say, "A community is healthiest when it can feed itself." And as ALG continues HHG and expands gardening experiences across Augusta, they plan to focus on engaging large groups of people to maintain participation levels and apply lessons learned in Harrisburg. Wherever ALG gardens go the goals are the same; healing and nourishing the residents that tend them.

While HHG has sparked an increase in gardens throughout Augusta, home-gardeners' participation is challenging to maintain in Harrisburg. As a low-income community, residents are negotiating life challenges that result in moving their homes fairly often. And for some a serious illness may limit their ability to maintain gardens, while others simply lose motivation as they juggle household demands.

Despite these challenges HHG has retained a committed core of a dozen or more households. The Hollenbecks have a model home garden and the majority of fresh food they eat is homegrown. Their success lies in making gardening a family activity. Everyone from their 80-year-old grandfather to high-school teenagers has a job, so that by harvest they’re all proud and ready to plan the next season’s planting.

“Togetherness jump starts participation. You get adults gardening through their kids. And by offering incentives --fresh eggs, bundles of extra produce, smoothies, story-hour in the garden.”

-Emily Martin,
Director of Programs,
Augusta Locally Grown

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**Highlights**

- **200+ raised-beds in Harrisburg.**
- **Average garden 3 raised-beds.**
- **12-30 households per season.**
- Reinforces healthy choices with weekly farmers market, produce prescription program, and cooking + gardening education.
- Icebox Farm: neighborhood greenhouse used to grow-out seedlings at low cost.
- Sibley Soilworks: free-to-low cost compost produced in the neighborhood.