

idea corner

City Gardeners

People in cities and towns don't always have room to grow. Any satisfaction to be gained from putting their green thumbs to use by planting and harvesting their own food is lost.

In Cabell County, West Virginia, however, the county Extension office and Huntington Board of Park Commissioners joined forces to provide "growing room" for the residents of Huntington, a city of 75,000. Three hundred and fifty 15 x 30 feet garden plots in suburban areas were made available to residents on a first-come, first-serve basis.

The combination of the two organizations working together on this seemed like a natural. The board of park commissioners had the land, and we had the technical know-how.

We publicized availability of the land, and processed requests for plots. Soil tests were made, and money from a five-dollar service fee for each plot covered costs of plowing, discing, fertilizer, lime, plotting, and a cover crop of wheat planted after the growing season.

Gardeners had few rules to follow, and could plant whatever they wanted. Twenty plots were even designated as organic gardens, where the more natural minded could grow their crops.

We asked that gardeners put their names on their land, keep it weed-free, and respect others' plots. We suggested that a minimum of five hours per week would be necessary to keep a plot productive.

Almost every vegetable imaginable was grown in the plots. The usual potatoes, beans, and corn were planted, but there were also watermelons, cantaloupes, black-eyed peas, sunflowers, tobacco, and peanuts.

The plots were well-kept, and no thievery took place, although they were unprotected. The gardeners respected each others' plots. We had walkways between every two rows of plots, and people walked only on that ground.

The plots themselves were surrounded with "string fences" and numbers on posts marked the plot numbers.

People interested in becoming gardeners, but who lacked the knowledge,





were urged to attend Extension-sponsored Vegetable Garden Schools, held in the Huntington area before growing season* began. State Extension specialists in horticulture, plant pathology and entomology, and conservation; a county Extension agent; and local organic gardeners discussed different aspects of making things grow. Those who already had the know-how, but wanted more information, also attended.

And help was available at the Extension office. Periodic visits were made to the garden plots to answer questions, offer suggestions, and receive feedback from the participants, who came from all walks of life. We found this was a good way to get more clientele for other Extension programs, and to inform more people about what we do.

Besides getting fresh produce from their gardens, the gardeners also reaped other benefits. Gardening is good exercise, gets people outside, and helps them meet others interested in the same thing. Many spent more time than was necessary working on their plots.

The demand during the first year of the cooperative program was so great that more land is being sought.

And during the second year of the program, gardeners who have become attached to their plots may be able to get the same land. Although plots will still be available only on a first-come, first-serve basis, by getting in their applications early, they can request their old plot.

An evaluation form was sent to all participants. We got a 50% response, which we felt was great. Ideas from them will be used to improve the program.

MARY MASTALERZ
Extension Specialist—Press
West Virginia University
Morgantown, West Virginia