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# Produce Your Own: A Community Gardening Program

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**Abstract:** Many County Extension offices offer an adult Master Gardener Program, which includes advanced gardening training, short courses, newsletters, and conferences. However, with the comprehensive training provided comes a large time commitment. The Produce Your Own program was created to introduce adults to gardening in a similar manner, but with shorter, less demanding, and less technical sessions. The outreach program consisted of a series of four interactive sessions focused on plot design, crop selection, garden maintenance, harvesting, and preserving. The content can be adapted in many ways for adults, seniors, youth, and other audiences, which allows Extension to reach larger audiences.

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## Introduction

Interest in at-home vegetable gardening continues to grow at a rapid pace. The National Gardening Association conducted a survey in 2008 with results showing that "43 million U.S. households planned to grow their own fruits, vegetables, berries, and herbs in 2009—up 19% from 36 million households in 2008" (National Gardening Association, 2009, p.4). Families concerned with healthier eating, especially given the economic downturn, have been compelled to replace lawns with vegetable gardens. While some people have a natural green thumb, others need direction and education in order to reap the fruits of their labor.

Montana Outdoor Science School (MOSS) was originally founded as a summer camp for youth. The goal was to create fun, hands-on, nature-based educational experiences. MOSS has grown into a year-round program offered in both local schools and outside of school settings. While youth remain the primary focus, MOSS has found the growing need to teach adults. Based on the results of a needs assessment, home gardening was identified as a top priority for adult programming.

Many county Extension offices offer an adult Master Gardener Program, which includes advanced gardening training, short courses, newsletters, and conferences. The program focuses on building participants' gardening knowledge and skills to contribute to community growth and development (Schrock, Meyer, Ascher, & Snyder, 2000). However, with the comprehensive training provided in this program comes a large time commitment of 17-22 weeknight sessions (Young, 2007). Therefore, the Produce Your Own program was created for MOSS to introduce adult participants to gardening in a similar manner, but with shorter, less demanding, and less technical sessions.

## How It Works

Gardening is a tradition that can be difficult to master in a place where winter is the dominant season. Produce Your Own was created to give a foundational introduction into the challenges of vegetable gardening in Montana in a short period of time. Scheduled in accordance with the growing season, this program consisted of a series of four interactive sessions focused on plot design, crop selection, garden maintenance, harvesting, and preserving. Each workshop included guest speakers considered experts in their field and hands-on learning activities. Classes were held in the summer, approximately 1 month apart on four Saturdays.

Program objectives were that participants will: (a) learn to plant and grow the 10 "best" vegetable crops suited for the region, (b) prepare a garden plot with seeds or seedlings from the local nursery, (c) demonstrate correct maintenance procedures for a home garden, (d) increase consumption of locally or home grown produce over the next year, and (e) increase knowledge and skills in harvesting, cooking, and preserving vegetables. The goal was to link local educators, producers, and businesses to the program participants in hopes that their overall local consumption of vegetables would increase over time.

The program consisted of three workshops and a culminating farm tour. Experiential learning opportunities allowed participants and instructors to interact, discuss, and demonstrate gardening procedures. A brief description of each workshop and its activities are listed in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
Workshop Activities

<b>Title of Class</b>	<b>Presenter</b>	<b>Topics Covered</b>	<b>Hands-on Experiences</b>
Planning and Planting Your	Plant Science Professor and Community Garden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Garden bed preparation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plot map design</li> <li>• Planting of</li> </ul>

Garden	Program Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where to purchase seed</li> <li>• Variety selection</li> <li>• Planting dates</li> <li>• Planting techniques</li> </ul>	vegetable seeds in take home containers
Natural Weed and Pest Control	Master Gardener State Program Coordinator and Owner of a local gardening store	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• USDA organic labeling</li> <li>• Integrated Pest Management</li> <li>• Organic and natural weed control</li> <li>• Composting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trash or compost? game</li> <li>• Pest identification photo match</li> </ul>
Harvesting and Preserving Your Crops	Local Chef	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preservation techniques</li> <li>• Cooking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooking class made with participants' vegetables</li> </ul>
Community Farm Tour	Local growers and producers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Production scale farming</li> <li>• Garden design</li> <li>• Greenhouse management</li> <li>• U-Pick operations</li> <li>• Cooperative farming practices</li> <li>• Marketing</li> <li>• Distributing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sampling of crops</li> <li>• Open discussion with growers</li> <li>• Take home of transplants</li> </ul>

Discussions were used at the beginning of each session to assess the knowledge and interest of participants. Participants were asked what they would like to learn from the sessions and what they already knew about gardening. At the end of each session, evaluations were conducted to measure learning and prepare content for future workshops.

Materials and prizes were donated by local businesses, which increased their exposure to the community. Participants could pay individually for each class or sign up for all four at a discounted rate. Materials included soil, seeds, vegetable packs, demonstration tools, handouts, and vegetables. Every class had a raffle for a gardening prize, which included vegetable transplants, gardening tools,

gloves, seeds, and a composter as a grand prize.

## Results

Twenty-eight adults participated in the program; however, a decrease in participation was seen after each workshop. There can be many explanations for this trend, but the evaluation revealed the dates and times of the classes as the most common barrier. Due to Montana's short summer and growing season, participants indicated that they were less willing to attend weekend programs being held indoors. Climate, geographic, and demographic factors were found to be important when marketing programs to gardening audiences. Brown (2009) suggested advertising online to increase and diversify audience participation. Promotion in newspapers, public radio stations, and gardening stores improved participation. Due to the success of the program, MOSS has devoted more resources to target adult audiences in the future.

## Advice to Others: Adaptation by Extension

Twiss et al. (2003) concluded that the benefits of gardening "enhance nutrition and physical activity and promote the role of public health in improving quality of life." (p. 1,435). This program can be adapted in many ways for adults, seniors, youth, and other audiences interested in home gardening. As revealed by the evaluation, the dates and times when a program is offered can have a large impact on the participation. Offering the program during weeknights might help to increase participation for working adults. Additionally, one-time panel discussions on a specific gardening topic could be designed to reach a more diverse audience.

The flexibility of shorter classes allows for expansion of the program's audience and location to senior homes, coffee shops, group homes, after-school programs, and community gardening sites. By including these audiences, Extension could greatly increase the number of people introduced to the organization and the benefits of home gardening. Adapting the program to specific audiences will allow Extension to reach people otherwise unable to complete the lengthy Master Gardener program. Any Extension agent can adapt the shorter sessions to be appropriate for each audience. Ideas for adaptation include gardening games and activities for youth, information on container and indoor gardening for participants located in urban areas, or healthy cooking ideas for agents dealing with community nutrition deficiencies. Family gardening days could also be included to reach youth and parents simultaneously. Integrated programming through the coordinated efforts among Extension educators has been shown to be valuable when planning similar programs (Jayaratne, Bradley, & Driscoll, 2009).

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