



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF FOOD, AGRICULTURAL,
AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCES

Hardin County Extension News Release

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Grow Ohio Meets Needs in Hardin County

By Mark Badertscher

Hardin County – A few years ago, the Hardin County OSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteers were looking for a way to provide outreach to the county and provide not only educational direction, but also meet the needs of a community that had residents who were needing assistance with their own food production and availability for their families. Enter a statewide program, Grow Ohio. Grow Ohio's goals included producing fruits and vegetables, providing education, and making produce available to needy families in the counties throughout the state. This produce could be produced locally by OSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteers in their own gardens, educational demonstration gardens, or through community gardening efforts where gleaning was practiced. This produce would then be made available to local charities to distribute to families throughout the county to meet the food needs of those less fortunate.

How could this goal of establishing food for the needy be done in the framework of existing Master Gardener Volunteer programming? What resources were available to assist with the goal of providing education and food for those who were in need? The main tool to make this effort happen was the Friendship Gardens of Hardin County. This local educational demonstration set of gardens was established by the Hardin County OSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteers over twenty years ago at 960 West Kohler Street in Kenton, Ohio. The Friendship Gardens already had limited vegetable gardening displays, but room for expansion of teaching and producing fruits and vegetables for those who would benefit from this county asset. Additional raised bed garden systems would be developed to add to vertical and trunk systems already in existence for teaching fruit and vegetable production to help meet this goal.

Enter Stewart Coats, a Hardin County OSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteer and avid fruit and vegetable grower who decided to lead the challenge. For years, Stewart has been tending to his fruit trees and growing vegetables on his property near Ridgeway, Ohio. His interest and experience, along with the knowledge of other Master Gardener Volunteers was put to work designing a way to produce vegetables at the Friendship Gardens using drip irrigation to increase production. A planning committee of Master Gardener Volunteers who also had an interest in developing and maintaining this space put together their ideas of how this new system would work.

A Grow Ohio grant for \$500 was received from the Ohio State University Master Gardener Volunteer program to seed the project to completion. After constructing three additional raised bed gardens to add to the existing vertical and trunk systems, a plan was put into place to maximize production in this new area of the demonstration garden that would also spawn educational programs in addition to the produce it would eventually provide for the Grow Ohio program to benefit Hardin County residents. A plan was set up to maximize the space growing early season, mid-season, and late season vegetables. This provided the motivation and ideas to develop educational programs around this new space, creating vegetable themed programs to teach residents how to produce their own fresh vegetables.

Currently the Friendship Gardens of Hardin County is actively producing herbs along with fruit and vegetables during the growing season. The past couple of summers, several related workshops provided education to county residents. "Totally Tomatoes," "Incredible Garlic," "Paint, Pumpkins and What Can Be Found with a Look Around," "I Can Eat THAT?," and "Growing Cucurbits" were some of the related educational programs this expanded area of the educational demonstration garden provided.

Six different local charities were identified to provide donations of fresh produce. As a result of the combined effort of the Hardin County OSU Extension Master Gardener Volunteers, 2269 pounds of fresh produce was donated to help feed families in the county which also earned the local group recognition for placing 5th for total pounds of produce donated in 2022 through the Grow Ohio program. During 2023, with the cooperation and assistance of other volunteers, the program continued to grow and benefit Hardin County with a total of 2313 pounds of fresh produce donated. This produce was made available weekly to four charities in addition to a couple of other charities on an occasional basis to help accomplish the goal of the Grow Ohio program. Hopefully, with the added help of new Master Gardener Volunteers, the program will increase its capacity in 2024.