

WHAT GOOD IS COMMUNITY GREENING? HERE ARE FOURTEEN ANSWERS.

Historians believe one of the nation's first community greening efforts — a garden — was established in Winston-Salem, North Carolina in 1759. Since then, researchers have learned a lot about the psychological and socio-economic benefits of community greening projects. Here are a few findings:

1) Community greening grows leaders. A study of the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society's community greening efforts in the City of Brotherly Love found that "across all neighborhoods, people who have not previously been involved in a leadership capacity have emerged. These garden leaders assume responsibility for organizing the neighbors to carry out the project and for maintaining the project."

2) Community greening can help feed people and save money. Numerous studies have found that home and community gardens produce food worth hundreds of dollars. This food and financial savings can be critically important to the nutritional and financial health of families living on low incomes or in neighborhoods poorly served by grocery stores. (See box, page 10.)

3) Community greening promotes healthier communities. In a 1980 study of 100 blocks of Atlanta, Georgia, D.R. Brogan and L.D. James found that physical characteristics — such as the presence of plants — were as important in promoting psychosocial health as the resident's socio-cultural backgrounds.

4) Community greening helps people learn about civic participation. Marti Ross Bjornson, a graduate student at Northwestern University, found that inner-city Chicago gardeners gained critical skills in working with their elected officials by becoming involved in greening projects. She concluded that, through greening, "these formerly marginalized urban residents can gain access to public policy, economic resources, and social interaction..."

5) Community greening helps save energy and keep urban air cool and clean. As early as the 1840s, greening advocates were calling parks and gardens "the lungs of the city." In Sacramento, California, the planting of 500,000 shade-giving urban trees is expected to save 50 to 75 megawatts of electricity by the year 2010 — enough to cool 26,000 homes per year. And, in Chicago, researchers found that the urban forest removed tons of pollutants from the air each day (see box, page 6).

6) Community greening provides job training. The horticultural industry pumps billions of dollars into the U.S. economy annually. Community greening projects have been a training ground for people interested in entering the industry, particularly in inner-

city areas where jobs can be scarce and skills hard to acquire.

7) Community greening helps reduce stress. A wide range of psycho- and physiological studies have found that exposure to green plants can relieve stress — especially in urban areas, where excessive noise and movement can make stress levels rise.

8) Community greening can help the homeless. Community gardens are a source of food for the homeless in some cities, and the community garden plot can also be "the first step toward self-sufficiency," notes Ishwarbhai C. Patel, who leads urban gardening programs in New Jersey. The garden provides "a place to call 'mine' and the opportunity to grow and produce things of value," he says.

9) Community greening helps preserve cultural heritage. In a 1992 study of San Jose, California's Community and Cultural Heritage Gardens, J. Dotter found that the gardens provided people with an important opportunity to maintain their cultural heritage by growing plants that play an important role in their culture's food or rituals.

10) Community greening provides places for children to play and learn. Community gardens and green spaces can play an important role in child development, a number of studies have found. For example, a garden can teach children how food is grown and what it looks like before arriving at the checkout counter.

11) Community greening helps cities save money by recycling. Greening projects often require tons of soil amendments. Many cities now provide these amendments by composting each fall's huge harvest of leaves — leaves which used to go to the dump!

12) Community greening makes people more productive. Psychologists have found that plants and green spaces provide the human mind with a rest. As a result, workers who have access to green spaces are more productive.

13) Community greening helps people keep physically fit. The President's Council on Physical Fitness has called America "a land of slumbering couch potatoes." Participation in greening could change that. In 1990, M.K. Taylor found that a gardener can burn more calories in one hour of work than someone doing aerobics.

14) Community greening teaches patience. The long, slow process of planting a garden and nurturing healthy plants can teach an important lesson to both children and adults in our fast-paced society. As one gardener puts it: "You can't plant a seed and expect FedEx to deliver the fruit tomorrow... gardening is one of the best lessons in delayed gratification I've ever seen."

