Assessing the Rock Island Community Garden Program

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Rock Island Community Gardens

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Introduction

- As part of the Sustainable Working Landscapes Initiative with Augustana College’s Upper Mississippi Center, students in Urban Design and Environmental Justice (Geography 325) conducted research on Rock Island’s community garden program this fall.
- The City of Rock Island currently has 21 vacant-tot community gardens and plans to expand the program to 24 gardens in 2019.
- The purpose of this project was to develop an initial assessment of the community garden program and provide general information about the benefits of urban gardens.
- Students worked with Dr. Strunk to conduct a survey with current garden program participants and tested soil from 14 gardens for lead contamination. Students collected 3 soil samples from 3 different sections of most gardens (north, middle, south sections). The soil tests showed that sections of 5 different gardens (#3N, #10N, #11N, #19N, #15S, and #21) have elevated lead levels above the EPA standard of 400 parts per million. The remaining 8 gardens will be tested for soil lead contamination in 2019.
- Students also created informational resources about the health benefits of gardens, conducted research about features of successful after-school gardening programs to be discussed with Rock Island and Milan school officials, and developed a proposal for a recipe book that can be used to raise awareness about the diversity of cultural practices in gardens and raise money for small-scale garden grants. Finally, students developed a proposal for a rainwater harvesting system, planned an outreach program for the creation of a future garden to participate in a bottom-up, community-led design process.
- Gardener survey results
  - Gardener survey results

Recipe book project

- Students envision this project as hybrid recipe/story book designed to connect immigrant and refugee gardeners to long-time Quad Cities community residents, diminish xenophobia, and inform both groups about the City of Rock Island’s garden program.
- The book would include photographs, gardener recipes that use garden produce, the cultural significance of those recipes and produce grown in their gardens ("plant stories"), information on World Relief and the refugee process, and a map depicting gardener/plant countries of origin, and information on Rock Island’s garden program.
- The book could be sold as a fundraiser for a local nonprofit organization like World Relief, and function as an education tool for schools.
- Students produced two recipe pages for the initial stage of this project using information and photographs obtained through interviews with refugee and immigrant gardeners.

Soils tests

- Most of the community garden plots in the program are located on vacant lots where old homes once stood. Many houses were painted using lead (Pb) paint before 1970. When such houses are demolished or simply age, Pb paint can chip off enter the soil.
- Many of the Rock Island garden spaces have Pb contamination in their soils. This becomes a social justice issue for the City of Rock Island when Pb contamination levels reach above the EPA safety standard of 400 ppm and threaten the health of gardeners and their families.
- Students in Geography 325 collected soil samples from the gardens, analyzed the samples at Augustana’s lab, georeferenced the raw data, and used ArcGIS software to create maps using GIS analysis methods.
- Analysis showed elevated Pb concentrations in soil around gardens 3, 10, 11, and 15

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