

# Impact

Sharing the difference CSU Extension makes in people's lives and their communities.

## Growing self-sufficiency through gardening

*By teaching Head Start families how to grow their own food, Boulder County Master Gardeners are helping low-income families create pathways to improved nutrition, food security, and self-sufficiency.*

### Issue

Reliable and affordable access to nutritious foods are cornerstones of good health. People without reliable access to fresh produce, whole grains, and other nutrient-rich foods often purchase packaged and processed foods that are less expensive yet high in fat and sodium. According to the Colorado Health Foundation, this happens most frequently among low-income, minority and rural populations. Subsequently, they suffer the highest rates of diet-related diseases.

Gardening offers an antidote by giving people a chance to connect with nature, get exercise and eat healthy, nutritious food—right out the back door. Studies cited by the Community Food Security Coalition of North America indicate that these benefits can reduce the risk of obesity and other diseases. This is good news for low-income populations, such as those served by Boulder County Head Start.<sup>1</sup> However, gardening can be tough without the resources and knowledge needed to succeed. That's why Boulder County Head Start created a mentoring program to teach its family clients to grow their own food. Boulder County Extension's Colorado Master Gardener program, with its pool of 235 highly trained volunteers, became an instant partner.

### Extension's Response

Piloted in 2009, the Head Start Family Garden project is a joint effort between Boulder County Extension's Master Gardener program and Boulder County Head Start. The project attracted 15 families in 2009 and 14 in 2010 (four families from the first year have returned). Each year Head Start recruits families who are then matched with a Master Gardener volunteer. From sowing seeds to harvesting, Master Gardeners provide the supplies, tools, expertise, assistance and encouragement that help Head Start families learn how to garden.

Beginning in early spring, Master Gardeners work with families to scout and plan locations for garden plots at their home, prepare soil, and plant seeds and seedlings—from spinach and melon to broccoli, chili peppers, corn, carrots and tomatoes. In the early months, volunteers visit families once a week to also instill confidence, troubleshoot, and help with special projects like installing drip hose systems. Thereafter, volunteers visit families as needed.

To aid Head Start families with gardening expenses, the Boulder County Extension Master Gardener program annually invests more than \$2,000 to provide the supplies at no cost. These include: compost, seeds, seedlings, tomato cages, hoses, shovels, rakes, soaker hoses, fertilizer, containers, and potting soil.



### The Bottom Line

- By teaching Head Start families how to grow their own food, Colorado Master Gardeners in Boulder County are helping families create pathways to improved nutrition, food security, and self-sufficiency.
- By successfully engaging youth, Master Gardeners are growing a new generation of gardening enthusiasts.

### By the Numbers

- Average cost to establish one family garden: \$140
- Amount donated by Boulder County Master Gardener program since 2009: \$4,100
- Number of families served since 2009: 29
- Percent of Head Start families planning to garden in the future: 86

## Impact

Master Gardeners report that Head Start families are successfully learning to grow their own food. Despite a few environmental and production setbacks, the majority of gardens produced an abundance of vegetables that gave families new and healthy eating choices.

In 2010, Master Gardener volunteers began tracking how much families have learned about gardening and if families are increasing their intake of health foods. Two of the inexperienced gardeners from 2009 now consider themselves 'somewhat experienced', while one of the 'somewhat experienced' gardeners from 2009 self-evaluates as 'very experienced.' Of the entire 2010 participating families, nearly 86 percent say they'll garden again in 2011.

While Master Gardener observations indicate that half of the participating families work as a team in weeding, watering and harvesting their garden, it seems that older siblings of Head Start children enjoy gardening the most. Parents say they believe their children—who otherwise might not have planted a pepper or sampled a zucchini—will be avid gardeners and veggie lovers for the rest of their lives. They wake early to water, get down on their hands and knees to inspect sprouts, and eagerly harvest and eat vine-ripened vegetables.

The Head Start Family Garden project is quickly becoming a model for how Colorado Master Gardener expertise and resources can give families control over what they eat and how they spend time. As Head Start family father Lorenzo Ramirez says, "I grew up in Mexico and worked on a farm, so I understand where food comes from. But this is something [my children] have never seen. This is teaching them so much." By helping families make informed gardening choices, covering the costs of tools and supplies, and offering reassurance, Master Gardeners are helping families create pathways to improved nutrition, food security and self-sufficiency.

<sup>1</sup> Head Start, a federally-funded program that began in 1965, seeks to meet the health, emotional, nutritional and psychological needs of low-income pre-school children.

*"They're an amazing family. All of them are out there working in the garden every day. When I come to help, they invite me to dinner, and we've really become friends. Their kids are just great."*

— Master Gardener Michael Arias  
who worked with Lorenzo and Maria Ramirez

*"My son put in the seeds and my daughter helped with the fence. And Vasi was always there for us. It's been an enriching experience. We make a great team."*

— Humberto Hernandez  
who worked with Master Gardener Vassilena Toneva

*"Jo was amazing. She helped tell us what would grow best where, and when we had a problem with a tomato plant, we called and she came right out. Our garden is thriving because of her."*

— Noemi Contreras  
who worked with Master Gardener Jo Zeimet

## Contact Information

Carol O'Meara  
CSU Extension, Boulder County  
Horticulture Entomology Agent  
303-678-6377  
comeara@bouldercounty.org