

August 2011

Edgewood College – Cafeteria Garden

Edgewood College is a liberal arts college located on 55 acres on the shore of Madison’s Lake Wingra. The college is administered by the Sinsinawa Dominican Sisters, a Catholic order whose founding Dominican values of truth, compassion, justice, partnership and community inform all activities at the college. Edgewood enrolls about 2500 students a year.

Edgewood’s cafeteria, Phil’s, serves hot, cold, to-go, and made-to-order meals to students living in the residence halls and to commuter students. It is a Green Restaurant Association Certified Green Restaurant.

Challenge

In 2009, Edgewood created a 1,800-square-foot campus community garden for staff and students. That spring, a group of students approached Jaime Franke, Edgewood’s dining services manager, to see if Phil’s Cafeteria would buy produce the students grew in the garden. Franke enthusiastically accepted, but as the summer progressed it became clear that the growing season didn’t mesh well with student calendars. The students were diligent about planting crops, but many left campus before the summer growing and watering season or at the end of summer before the harvest. Little food was produced for use at Phil’s that summer. However, Franke realized the gardening concept was sound and supported the dining services goal of increasing the amount of local food served on campus.

Strategy

In summer 2010, the campus garden transitioned from a community garden to a kitchen garden that supplied Phil’s. Edgewood’s kitchen staff planted a variety of crops to get the gardening effort started and begin learning. Employees could plant anything they wanted to get a feel for how it grew and whether it would be useful to the kitchen.

Edgewood composts their kitchen waste in a bin constructed by a student, and they began using this compost on the garden. No chemical fertilizers or pesticides are used in the garden. A rain storage system provides irrigation, and no municipal water is used for watering the crops.

For summer 2011, the plantings were focused on high-yield crops that had been successful the previous year. Fewer types of crops were planted to increase the yield of those that were. In crop selection, Edgewood also gave preference to items that could be served on the salad bar, where they can showcase the produce with a sign indicating the item was grown organically in the Edgewood garden.



Edgewood cafeteria garden, summer 2011

Results

In 2010, the garden produced 200 pounds of food, but the quantity of each type of produce was limited. Some crops turned out to be impractical to use; for example, the ghost peppers were beautiful to look at but too hot to eat. The 2011 plantings targeted the production of greater volumes of usable produce, focusing on items like strawberries, herbs, and onions, but avoiding items like carrots that only produce one edible item per plant but are needed in great quantity by the Edgewood kitchens. With the 2011 tomato crop, Edgewood plans to make their own tomato sauce.

The cost to do the gardening is low and comes from the dining services operating budget. In 2010, the gardeners spent about \$750 on plants and supplies including fencing, and in 2011 the total was about \$500. The projected cost for 2012 is even lower, since the kitchen staff plans to start their own seeds instead of purchasing seedlings.

Although the kitchen staff now performs new gardening tasks, Edgewood incurs no extra labor costs because the college employs its 12 full-time kitchen employees year-round. Since their food-preparation duties are reduced in the summer when most students are away from campus, they have time to work in the garden as well as prepare gardeners and purchased food for winter storage. Franke's gut-feel is that growing these vegetables will save Edgewood money over purchasing them; this belief will be evaluated after the next growing season.

As with their local sourcing efforts, Edgewood has found it challenging to get their customers – the student eaters – to pay attention to the gardening effort. The motivation for gardening and local sourcing came from the dining services staff's understanding of Edgewood's values. Students eating in the dining halls, who are mainly freshmen and sophomores, haven't yet expressed strong opinions about locally sourced food. The dining services staff believes that education during college orientation would be helpful for getting students to care about this effort. Their long-term goal is to make Phil's more of a learning environment and not just a place to eat.

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