

# FAMILY GARDEN DEMONSTRATION PROJECT EVALUATION



Updated February 11, 2015

“Every day felt like a new adventure for me, waiting to see what would sprout. This project has really inspired me. While searching the internet, I discovered that there are all kinds of modern ways to keep a garden in a small space with limited amounts of time, and I’m looking forward to getting more involved in growing food!” -The Butler Family



Photo taken at Wesley-Rankin Community Center

Evaluation and Report Completed By  
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Photo taken at Brother Bill’s Helping Hand

## GardenSoxx Kit Contents

- 8 GardenSoxx Tubes
- GardenSoxx Care Guide
- Garden Fresh Recipe Book
- 9 Vegetable Seed Packets
- Watering Can

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Pebbles Apartment Garden At Week 6



While counties along the Texas-Mexico border suffer the highest rates of food insecurity in the state, almost double the national average, the remaining counties follow the same trajectory of widespread food insecurity. In Dallas County, residents experience higher rates of food insecurity than the Texas and the national average.



20% of Dallas County's population is food insecure.

26.8% of Dallas County's children are struggling with food insecurity.

30% of Dallas County seniors had to choose between food and medical care.

35% of Dallas County seniors had to choose between food and paying for heat/utilities.<sup>2</sup>

Physical, emotional and spiritual health are too often compromised when hunger and poverty are a daily reality. For low-income families, this can cause increased physical and emotional stressors since hunger and poverty are symptoms of a larger socio-political structure that upholds institutional racism and classism. For low-income families of color, food insecurity intersects with and is exacerbated by poor economic development in their neighborhoods, low-funded schools, underemployment, mental health concerns, immigration status, and lack of health insurance.<sup>3</sup> The intersection of these circumstances, often poses the greatest risks and threats to children and seniors. Insufficient or non-nutritious food puts children at a higher risk to demonstrate concerns in their developmental growth and exhibit behavioral and social challenges. For seniors, living on a fixed income while facing increased health and mobility issues, often forces them to choose between meeting their dietary needs and other basic necessities such as medicine.<sup>4</sup>

### *Federal & Local Nutrition Programs*

Households with income above 185% of the poverty line are eligible for fewer federal nutrition programs, such as SNAP and reduced priced lunches for children, because eligibility ceilings are typically closer to 130-150% of household income. Furthermore, Texas is one of three states that takes personal assets into account when applying for social benefits. This eligibility criteria decreases federal subsidized nutrition resources for thousands of Texan families and increases their reliance on local efforts to supplement their daily food intake.<sup>5</sup> As a local effort to end food insecurity, food banks, non-profit organizations and churches distribute food to low-income families in their

<sup>2</sup> "Child Food Insecurity Rate." Healthy North Texas. Web. 10 Jan 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Ford, Richard T. "Why the Poor Stay Poor." The New York Times. N.p., 6 Mar. 2009. Web. 8 Feb. 2015.

<sup>4</sup> "The Impact of Hunger." Feeding America. Web. 20 Jan 2015.

<sup>5</sup> "Expanding Access to SNAP." Food Research and Access Center. Web. 10 Feb 2015.

neighborhoods on a daily basis. However expansive these programs may be, they are relegated to providing temporary relief for families as they do not address root causes of poverty and hunger. Though they provide immediate relief for families, these local measures do not replace the need for a national and regional expansion of the social safety net, including preventative measures such as adequate, and affordable housing, quality education and a livable wage for working people.<sup>6</sup>

## A Solution: The Family Garden Demonstration Project

The Family Garden Demonstration Project is a model of a community-based response to the rate of food insecure households in Dallas. Five of the nine participating faith-based organizations already operate a weekly food pantry; however, they hoped to empower their congregation members to supplement their food intake by providing them with the tools and knowledge to grow their own food. GardenSoxx gardens were designed to be a simple and convenient way to make gardening more accessible to low-income families who often live in high-density housing with poor quality soil – a population for whom traditional, in-ground gardening is impractical. 148 GardenSoxx garden kits, which were financially sponsored by the 9 organizations and congregations, were distributed to 120 low-resourced families throughout Dallas. Each family received a full kit which was comprised of 8 GardenSoxx, a *Garden Fresh Recipe Book*, a *GardenSoxx Care Guide*, 9 different vegetable seeds and a watering can. This self-contained, raised bed gardening system uses organic, compost filled soil to grow a variety of pesticide-free vegetables. Host organizations hoped to solidify stronger relationships with their participating families, as well as analyze how the GardenSoxx gardens impacted their food pantry participation rate.



GardenSoxx tubes placed in the existing garden of a Northlake Baptist Church-Garland member.

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<sup>6</sup> HLPE, 2012. Social protection for food security. A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome 2012.

# Evaluation

## Purpose & Methodology

With previous GardenSoxx garden projects yielding substantial vegetable growth throughout the state of Ohio, Michigan and Pennsylvania, the Faith Community Action Team in Dallas established three measures of success for evaluating the pilot project.

The evaluation of the Family Garden Demonstration Project intended to:

1. Assess if and how much the GardenSoxx garden improved food insecurity.
2. Determine best practices for growing vegetables in the GardenSoxx garden in the Northern Texas climate.
3. Analyze the impact the project had on families' relationships with their host organizations.

The final list of participating organizations were: Brother Bill's Helping Hand, North Texas Conference-United Methodist Church, Feed Lake Highlands, Northlake Baptist Church – Garland, Presbyterian Children's Home, City Church International, Temple Emanu-El, Cliff Temple Baptist Church and Sharing Life Community Outreach.

Data was gathered for the evaluation of this project by:

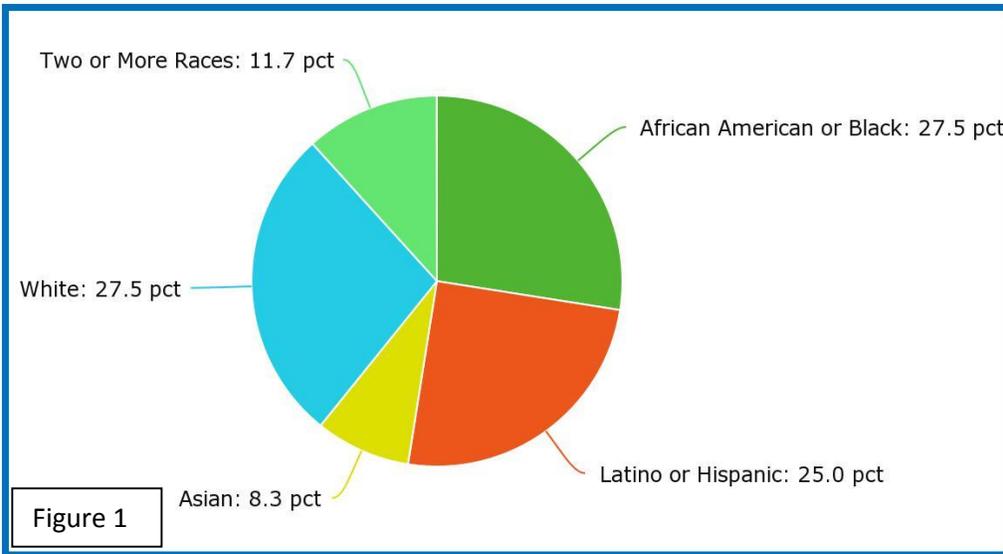
1. Conducting biweekly contacts with 7 families via email, phone, and home visits. Information gathered included maintenance practices, challenges, and overall impressions of the use of the GardenSoxx garden.
2. Receiving monthly emails about each organizations general experiences with the GardenSoxx gardens.
3. Conducting a final phone survey with 29 of the 120 families, which was administered at the end of the fall season. The survey collected detailed information about family demographics, maintenance practices, and participant's overall experiences with the GardenSoxx gardens.

# Statistical Results

## Demographic of Participants

The following demographic data is for all 120 family participants of the gardens. Participation was diverse among ethnicity and age, although the largest segment of the garden recipients were seniors.

*Ethnic Breakdown of Family Recipients*



■ African American or Black   
 ■ Latino or Hispanic   
 ■ Asian   
 ■ White  
■ Two or More Races

meta-chart.com

*Age of Head of Household Participants*

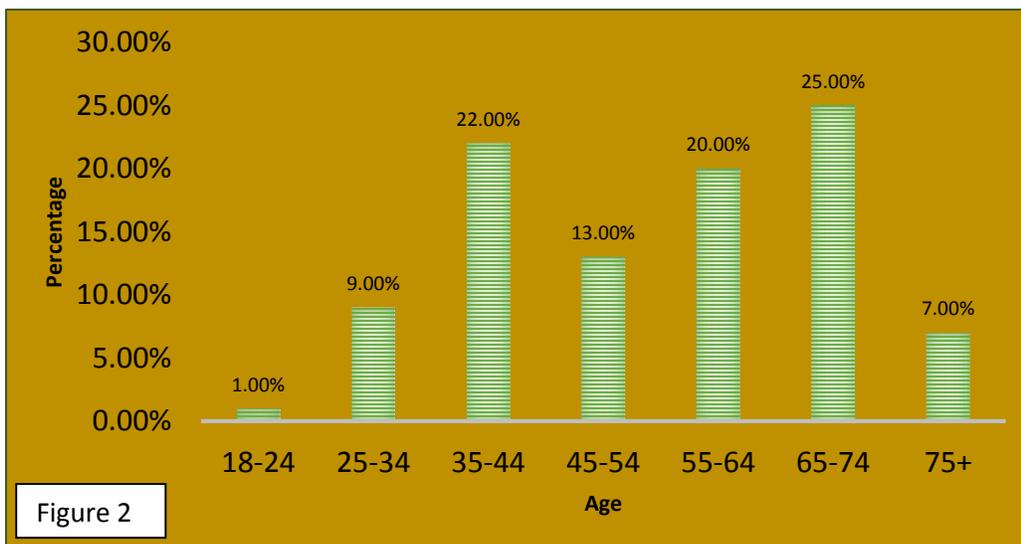


Figure 2

## Demographics of Participants

65% 

65% of the 29 families interviewed had some previous gardening experience, ranging from self-taught skills to growing up in rural, farming communities.

32% 

32% of the 29 families interviewed were raised in rural farming communities, thus having extensive gardening experience.

93% 

93% of the 29 families interviewed expressed personal self-interests as primary motivators for participating in the garden project.

## Garden Maintenance Experiences, Practices and Challenges

The following information was gathered from the 29 final phone interviews.

58%

2024 SEPTEMBER						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
28	29	30				

58% planted their gardens on the scheduled planting day – September 13<sup>th</sup>.



57% did not water their gardens twice a day.



26.9% had issues with insects, rodents or other bugs eating their vegetables, especially the lettuce and spinach.



46.2% noted stagnant vegetable growth.



44% used the *GardenSoxx Care Guide* on the planting date only.

41%

2024 OCTOBER						
Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
	1	2	3	4		
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29	30	31	

41% planted their gardens after September 13<sup>th</sup>, ranging from 1-3 weeks later.



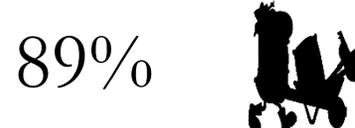
72.2% liked the vegetable choice.



93% planned to plant new vegetables in their GardenSoxx gardens for the spring season.



10.7% received assistance from family, friends, neighbors or their host organization in caring for their garden.



89% said they would have wanted but did not receive any assistance in caring for their gardens.



47% said their host organizations never contacted them.

## Vegetable Yield

The following chart demonstrates how many families were able to harvest each vegetable.

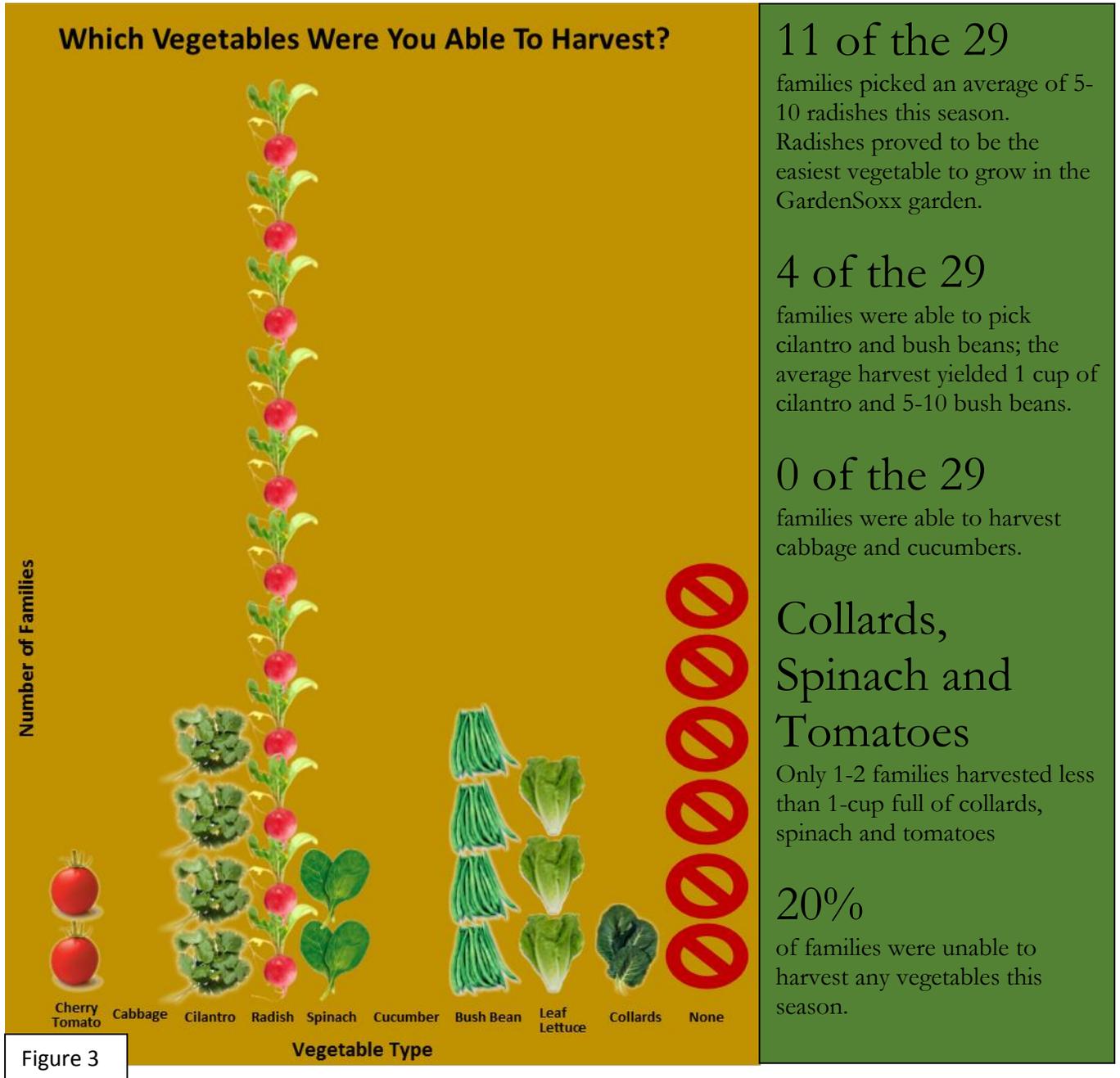


Figure 3

## How Gardening Experience, Watering Practices and Planting Date Affected Vegetable Yield

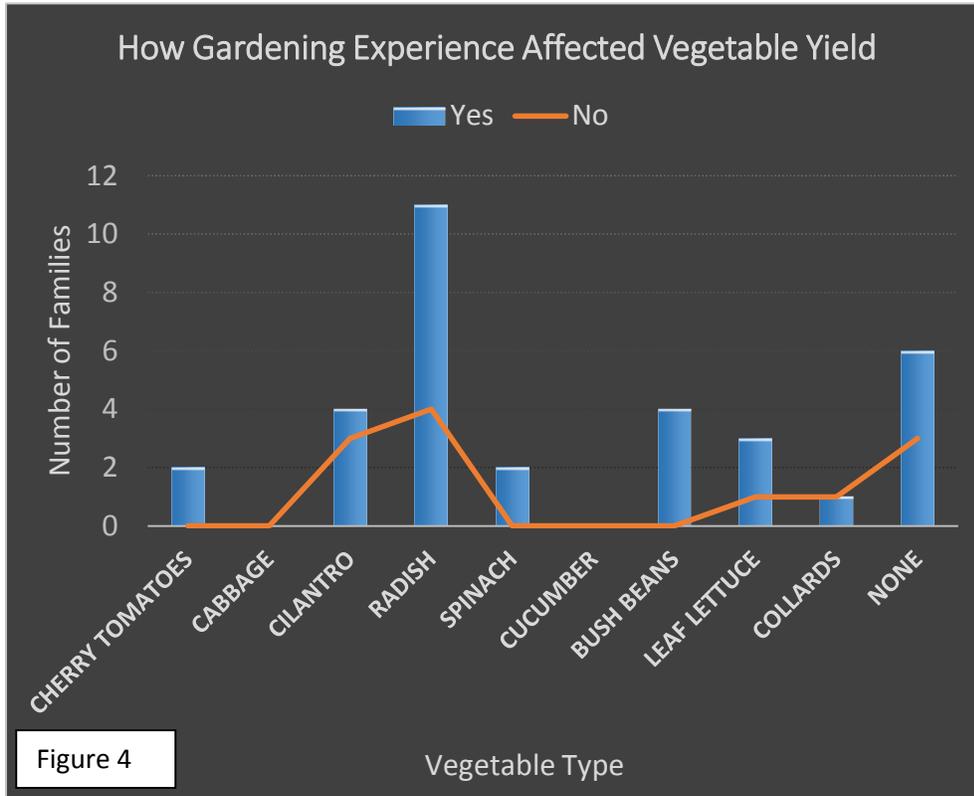


Figure 4

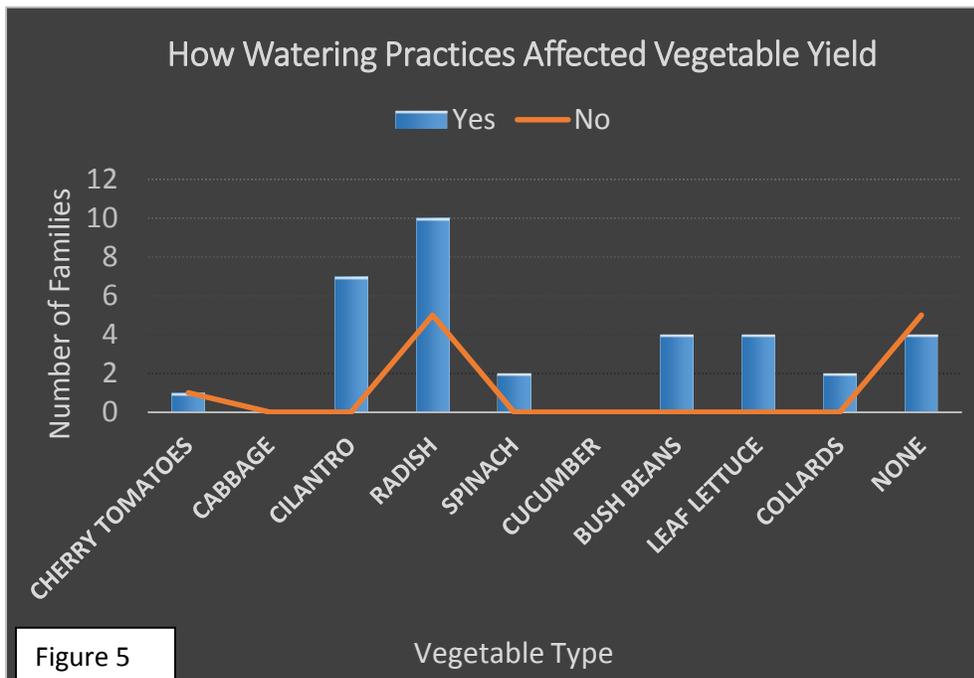


Figure 5

Figures 1, 2 and 3 illustrate how gardening experience, watering practices and the planting date affected vegetable yield.

Figure 1 demonstrates how gardening experience affected vegetable yield. The number of families who were able to grow radishes, tomatoes, spinach, bush beans and leaf lettuce doubled with gardening experience.

Figure 2 illustrates how watering practices affected vegetable yield. Adhering to watering twice a day with two full gallons had the greatest impact above any other factor, in terms of vegetable growth.

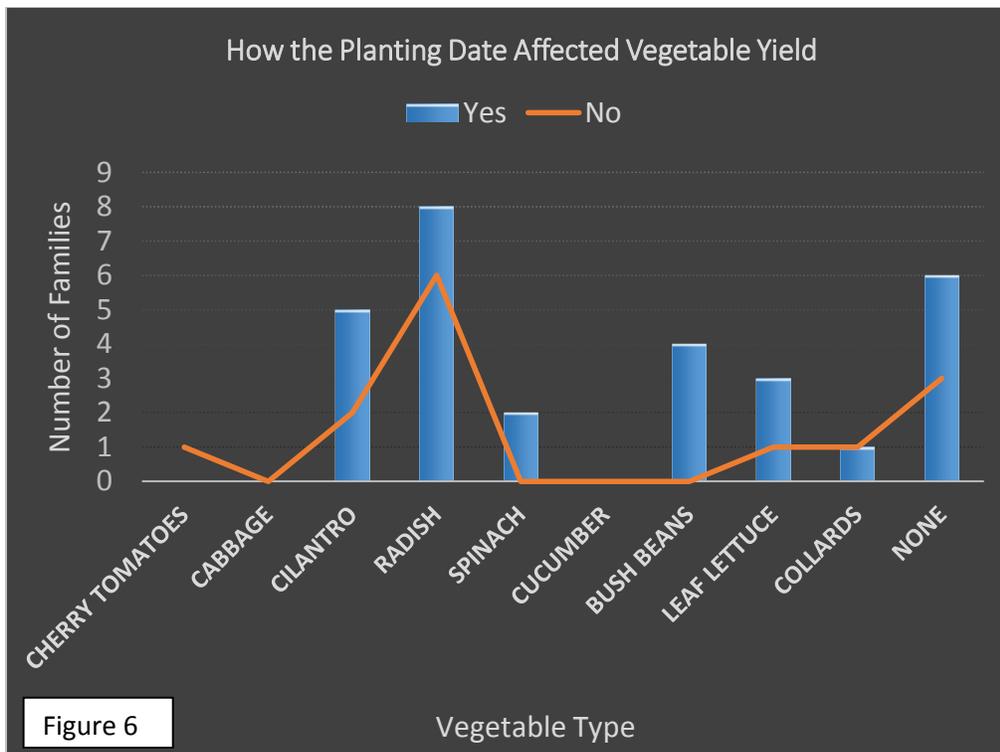


Figure 3 demonstrates how the September 13<sup>th</sup> planting date affected vegetable yield.

Families that planted on September 13<sup>th</sup> were more likely to grow vegetables of every type than those that planted at a later date.

## Discussion

### Evaluation Goal #1

**Assess if and how much the GardenSoxx gardens improved food insecurity.**

With high hopes for the simple maintenance of and robust vegetable yield of the GardenSoxx gardens, families and host organizations were eager to determine how much of an impact the gardens made in supplementing families' food intake.

The stagnant growth of most of the vegetables, per Figure 3, did not improve any families' food security. However, families who harvested an average of a cup-full of radishes and cilantro during an entire planting season seemed undeterred by the minimal vegetable growth and conveyed genuine interest in re-planting in their GardenSoxx garden for the spring season. So, what motivators were associated with their continued interest if not a substantial vegetable yield?

Families praised the program for giving them the opportunity to:

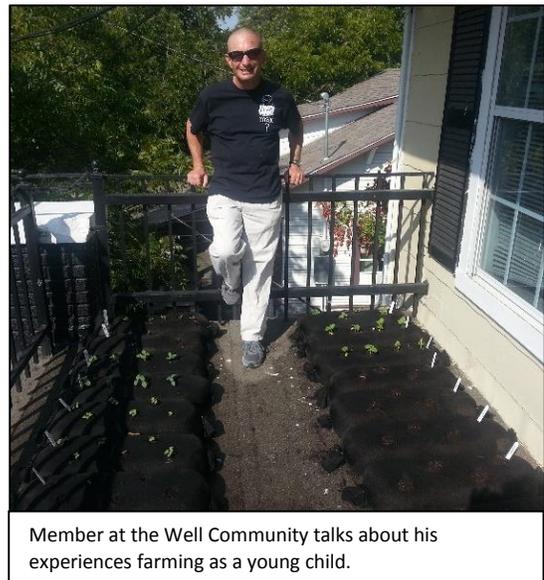
- *Learn new gardening techniques:* Demonstrating personal interest in gardening was a prerequisite for all families to receive a GardenSoxx garden. The project provided families with the tools to explore an alternative urban gardening method without



Mrs. Gonzalez from Feed Lake Highlands included her children in the gardening process.

the need for land and extensive training. However, all families, regardless of experience with traditional in-ground gardening, expressed the desire to receive more support and training on gardening techniques.

- *Teach their children about food production and responsibility:* Families with young children praised the program for providing them with an activity that the entire family could participate in. As an example, the Reed family has a young child who helped plant, water and tend to the garden on a weekly basis. Along with demonstrating responsibility, parents used the gardens as a way to teach their children about growing produce and taking care of the living organisms that gives them sustenance and life.
- *Grow their own food:* As miniscule of a vegetable yield there was this season, families were intrigued by the growth of their vegetables and felt that a minimal yield was better than no yield. Low income families living in high-density apartments, with little to no access to personal land, are also less likely to have access to adequate grocery stores in their immediate area – which robs them of the opportunities to buy and grow nutritious foods. Placing the self-contained garden tubes on any surface gives families the ability to try to grow their own food in unconventional spaces.
- *Reconnect with historical and familial gardening knowledge:* There was a significant number of families who were raised in rural farming communities and had extensive gardening knowledge and experience. They recalled memories of planting, tending to and harvesting produce as young children and appreciated the gardens for enabling the continuity of those traditions outside of their rural upbringings. For example, a Well Community resident from Cliff Temple Baptist Church took ownership and responsibility for the gardens because it was reminiscent of farming with his grandparents as a young child.



Member at the Well Community talks about his experiences farming as a young child.

These unintended, yet positive, impacts of the gardening process seemed to supersede the disappointment associated with minimal vegetable growth. 93% of families interviewed indicated great potential for future plantings in the GardenSoxx garden and expressed interest in engaging in new gardening techniques for the following season.

## ***Evaluation Goal #2***

### **Determine best practices for growing vegetables in the GardenSoxx garden in the Northern Texas climate.**

The lack of vegetable yield requires an analysis of what factors contributed to the stagnant growth and what best practices can be implemented for future planting seasons.

#### *Experience/ Sufficient Support Is Needed*

Per Figure 4, participants with gardening experience harvested twice as many vegetables as those with minimal to no experience. Although praised for their simplicity and easy maintenance, the use of GardenSoxx gardens did not override families' need of sufficient and consistent support throughout the gardening process. The self-containable GardenSoxx garden eliminates the challenges associated with soil type and toxicity, but families faced other significant issues related to the planting and placement of their gardens, maintenance practices, troubleshooting multiple issues and harvesting vegetables. As with all gardening methods, first time gardeners needed mentors, guiders and resources to support and foster a productive learning environment. The *GardenSoxx Care Guide* – which was meant to address concerns associated with gardens – went unused by all participants after the planting date. These findings validate that having sufficient and consistent person-to-person support throughout the entirety of the process would optimize the amount of vegetables grown in the gardens, as well as teach families valuable gardening techniques.

#### *Watering Twice a Day With Two Full Watering Cans Is Standard*

After years of project implementation nationwide, the Family Garden Initiative has established the standard practices of watering GardenSoxx gardens twice a day with two full watering cans for optimal vegetable growth. This standard is specific to GardenSoxx gardens because most of the water automatically drains out of the mesh tubes. Over half of the families did not follow the recommended watering practices and their vegetable growth was nonexistent, with the exception of radishes.

#### *Plant According to the Recommended Schedule*

The recommended planting date for the fall season is the last week of August, which means the official September 13<sup>th</sup> planting date was at least two weeks too late for optimal vegetable growth. Families that planted their gardens 1-3 weeks after September 13<sup>th</sup> consequently shortened their gardening timeline by a total of 4-5 weeks. Furthermore, Dallas County hit freezing temperatures in early November, drastically decreasing the time for vegetable growth by several more weeks. With the assistance of master and expert gardeners, organizations can determine the best planting date according to the season and the amount of time each vegetable takes to fully harvest.

Although the fall season produced minimal vegetables, not nearly enough to supplement anyone's monthly food intake, we learned that families with gardening experience, who watered their gardens twice a day with two full watering cans and planted their gardens according to schedule harvested more vegetables than those who did not follow these practices. Nonetheless, the vegetable yield for families who followed these practices was still low and requires a further analysis of how other factors, such as the placement of the gardens, soil type, and seed choice impacted vegetable growth.

### ***Evaluation Goal #3***

#### **Analyze the impact the project had on families' relationship with their host organizations.**

Host organizations with diverse congregation members hoped to use the gardens as a tool to create positive working relationships with their members across racial and economic lines. However, almost half of the families stated they had no contact with their host organizations throughout the process and almost 90% said they wanted regular support in caring for their gardens. The lack of follow-through on their initial commitment to check in with families on a regular basis was partly due to the organizations' inability to foresee how much support families were going to need, which led to setting vague expectations of both families and volunteers. Furthermore, volunteers in charge of supporting families were not always linguistically, culturally, ethnically or economically representative of the families they were working with.

An exception to this finding, however, was at Pebbles Apartments, where a volunteer from Temple Emanu-El made garden check-ins an integral part of their weekly case management meetings. Gardens at Pebbles Apartments did not produce significantly more vegetables than other gardens, but vegetable growth was steady and survived longer than other gardens as they received assistance from the Temple-Emanu-El volunteer in watering their gardens twice a day and learning how and when to harvest.



## **Recommendations**

The Family Garden Demonstration Project presented many rewards and challenges for the use of GardenSoxx gardens in Dallas County. After months of evaluation, the following recommendations were developed for organizations and congregations interested in carrying out the project and are based on survey findings, narratives of participants, and research on successful gardening projects. With growing interest in the project by participating families and sponsoring organizations, implementing these recommendations is meant to further improve and address significant barriers to the project's future success, optimize vegetable growth and capitalize on the positive social impacts of the gardens.

1. *Assess Level of Commitment for Potential Gardeners and Supporters*<sup>7</sup>: Laying the groundwork for a successful gardening project includes the buy-in of key supporters and participants.
  - a. Ensure there is genuine interest and sufficient time and energy to develop and implement programming for the garden project. Determine level of commitment from potential gardeners, volunteers and expert/master gardeners.

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<sup>7</sup> "10 Steps to Starting a Community Garden." American Community Gardening Association. Web. 18 Feb 2015.

2. *Build Community Through Strategic Engagement:* Host organizations noted building community as a primary goal for the garden project, and almost 90% of participating families expressed interest in receiving support with their gardens. Below are some guidelines to address both host and familial needs through the use of the GardenSoxx gardens:
  - a. Include families in the organization of the project and develop a shared and focused goal for the gardens. Families who feel like their input in the development of the project is needed and valued are more likely to be engaged throughout the entire season and develop a sense of ownership over the success of the gardens. The key is to empower families to voice their hopes and concerns of the program, learn new skills and develop a greater sense of community with other participating families through skill shares.
  - b. Develop regular (biweekly or monthly) gardening workshops, with the assistance of expert/master gardeners, to encourage families to learn new skills, share their experiences, ask relevant questions, troubleshoot issues and provide updates on the growth of their vegetables. Consistent workshops will expand families' skill set and encourage them to support one another within and outside of the formal meetings.
3. *Be Realistic About Your Organization's Capacity:* Making an assessment of resources and capacity will help organizations determine how many gardens they can support long-term.
  - a. Form a planning committee of well-organized and reliable people in your congregation who commit to supporting the entirety of the project. This group can be comprised of gardening experts in your congregation, volunteers who have the time to devote to the project and families who are interested in receiving a GardenSoxx garden.
  - b. Consider how many reliable volunteers in your organization can provide consistent, long-term support for families and their gardens.
  - c. Prioritize gardens for families who have the time, space, energy, commitment and passion to maintain a garden.
4. *Tap Into Local Resources And Experts:* Families and host organizations need support in project development and implementation. Establishing rapport with expert/master gardeners will allow the organizations and families to learn together in a supportive environment.
  - a. Identify all your local resources. Are there members in your congregation with gardening and/or landscaping experience who can provide support? What skills and resources already exist among the people in your congregation?
  - b. Contact neighborhood gardeners, master gardeners, agricultural extension offices, local botanical garden experts and horticultural societies in your area to provide input on the development and maintenance of the gardens, as well as help lead biweekly workshops for families receiving gardens
5. *Vegetable Choice and Planting Schedule:* Master gardeners have substantial knowledge about which vegetables are easy to grow for first-time growers. With their input, organizations can choose crops that are nutritious, culturally appropriate and have a high probability of growing, regardless of gardening experience.

- a. Choose plants and herbs that are easy to grow for first-time gardeners. With the input of master gardeners, host organizations can decide which vegetables are nutritious and ideal to grow for the season and climate.
- b. Consider using plant transplants for vegetables that are difficult to grow for first-time growers.
- c. Plant according to the recommended schedule for each vegetable type. With the assistance of expert gardeners, organizations can calculate the appropriate planting date based on vegetable choice and seasonal considerations.
- d. Optimize the amount of vegetable growth by cutting holes into the GardenSoxx tubes according to the growth pattern of each vegetable. Cutting 4 holes in each tube, as is recommended in the *GardenSoxx Care Guide*, is not ideal for all seed growth.

6. *Eco Friendly Gardening Techniques:*

- a. Place the GardenSoxx tubes in a receptacle that can hold excess water to encourage water reuse, and minimize water bills. Use rain barrels to collect rain for future watering use.
- b. If families have access to a wheel barrel, consider placing the GardenSoxx garden in it for easy transport while following direct sunlight.
- c. To match the organic compost in the GardenSoxx tubes, consider buying organic, non-GMO seeds, if that is of interest and financially viable for your organization.

## Visions For The Future

As the Family Garden Demonstration Project comes to an end, host organizations and families are left with many questions and options in regards to the direction of this project. Per the results of this evaluation, it is unlikely that a 4 by 4 garden will ever end hunger and poverty. Therefore, the purpose and goals for the project should be redefined to reflect the experiences and outcomes of the fall planting season. A redefinition of the purpose and indicators of success of the program can encourage faith based organizations and congregations to use the GardenSoxx gardens as a tool to begin having conversations about and move their efforts to address root causes of hunger and poverty. The process of focusing on the mental, physical and spiritual well-being of their diverse congregation members – often referred to as holistic ministry<sup>8</sup> – calls upon congregations to consider the social, economic and political causes of hunger and poverty and work to address these through word and action.

Establishing a holistic ministry approach does not happen overnight and requires a complex understanding of the issues and support in creating the structures to uphold this work. Regardless of where congregations are in their work to end poverty, all congregations can begin to lay the groundwork to become sites for justice; and can begin that process through the garden project.

The results of the evaluation indicated that stagnant vegetable growth did not impede families' positive experiences with the project. Therefore, a shift in focus from ending food insecurity with

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<sup>8</sup> "Holistic Ministry. ESA. Web. 5 Feb 2015.

the gardens to capitalizing on the positive social impacts of the gardens would put social concern for low-income families into action. **“There are three types of social concern: relief for the poor; development, or empowering the poor; and working for structural change.”**<sup>9</sup> Relief for low-income families includes charitable ventures such as providing homeless shelters, food and clothes drives and other emergency services. Development or empowerment of low-income families means building community cohesion through social relationships and encouraging all congregation members to put the values of their faith into collective action. Finally, working for structural change means to engage in legislative advocacy and change policies to positively impact low-income communities.

In regards to the garden project, congregations who are motivated by their religious faith and traditions to engage in anti-poverty work, can move from relieving immediate stressors related to adequate and nutritious food to empowering their families to be a central part of the decision-making process. This process can begin by enacting the suggestions outlined in the “Build Community Through Strategic Engagement” section of the evaluation. The difference lies in, are decisions about the garden project being made for the family participants? Or are the families themselves at the table, representing their own interests, with an equal voice in the development and implementation of the project? Most importantly however, inviting family participants to be a central part of the project, from its inception to the end, sends the message that their lives, opinions and voices matter, that those with personal experiences with poverty can and should be at the forefront of any local, state and federal anti-poverty efforts, and that it takes a cohesive group of people to truly make a difference. Moving from relief to empowerment is especially important because all participating organizations and congregations in the fall demonstration project were headed by Caucasian leaders, while 75% of the garden participants were low-income, people of color. If implemented with the outlined recommendations for building strategic community, congregations can use the relationships built around gardening to develop a more nuanced understanding of how they can better support and create a more cohesive congregation across racial and class lines. Reframing this project to one of justice and inclusion rather than charity can provide congregations with a complex understanding of the realities of living in poverty which can help re-focus their efforts to reflect the needs of their communities.

Another issue worthy to mention was the lack of participation by congregations of color in the fall demonstration project. Project organizers should ensure that faith leaders are representative of the family participants by strategically outreaching to congregations with African-American, Latino and Asian leaders who may be interested in the project. The GardenSoxx garden project has a lot of potential, if implemented with a direct focus on justice. Giving families the tools and training to explore gardening, will allow them to grow food in their own neighborhoods where access to land and quality soil is scarce, reconnect with historical and cultural gardening knowledge that is often lost when families move into space-constrained housing, and teach their young children through participatory action about food production and how to tend for living organisms that in turn nourish their life. This project also has the potential to help families strengthen relationships with their neighbors, enhance mental well-being by giving them a sense of purpose and meaning, engage in reciprocal learning and sharing, commit to caring for the natural environment and integrate

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<sup>9</sup> “Holistic Ministry. ESA. Web. 5 Feb 2015.

families more deeply into their faith community. Ultimately, communities who feel like their voices matter will feel a sense of empowerment as they add another skill to their arsenal of self-determining tactics, which will build their capacity to fulfill their, and all of our quest for social, economic and political justice.