

SOWING THE Seeds OF VICTORY



Mountain Roots leading at-home gardening revival

Morgan Schaefer
Times Staff Writer

Utilizing a sunny windowsill for herbs and potting plants at home has become a welcome respite for many during the COVID-19 pandemic. One local organization is planning on harnessing that momentum for the greater good of the community.

Mountain Roots Food Project is coordinating a collaborative garden effort among home and community gardeners in the Gunnison Valley in response to COVID-19.

“The Victory Garden Revival is a new project that Mountain Roots is launching this season to combat food insecurity in the Gunnison Valley during the pandemic,” said Sean Kohler of Mountain Roots who is leading the effort.

Kohler says the inspiration came from the “war garden movement” at the onset of World War I, later called “victory gardens.” The redirection of commercial crops to troops overseas created food shortages and rationing in the U.S. Citizens were then incentivized by the government to create their own sustainable gardens that could provide fresh produce for themselves and the community at large.

By the end of WWII, “About 40 percent of all the produce consumed in the U.S. was grown in home gardens,” added Kohler. “We’re now at another moment in history when there is a lot of stress on our food systems.”

The response to the global pandemic reflects the need for self-sufficiency and healthful eating amid supply-chain uncertainty and fears of virus exposure at grocery stores.

The first step to involvement is registering your home garden, raised beds, patio



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containers or chicken coop with Mountain Roots. You’ll then be provided with free seeds, a yard sign and \$25 to spend in the online local food marketplace. The Mountain Roots Farm Team then facilitates garden consultations depending on experience level. Entry level gardeners would be given assistance and resources to get their projects up and running. More seasoned gardeners could in turn be mentors to budding growers and offer their knowledge.

They’ve also teamed up with master gardeners from Colorado State University’s local Extension Office as well as student gardeners from the Organics Guild at Western Colorado University to aid with consultations and educational resources.

“We’re reaching out to all gardeners in the valley regardless of experience level and trying to hone in differently to each level,” explained Kohler. Mountain Roots also offers community garden memberships if you don’t have your own space to tend to.

The goal is for growers to eventually have enough yield to donate some or all of their bounty to the Mountain Roots Backyard

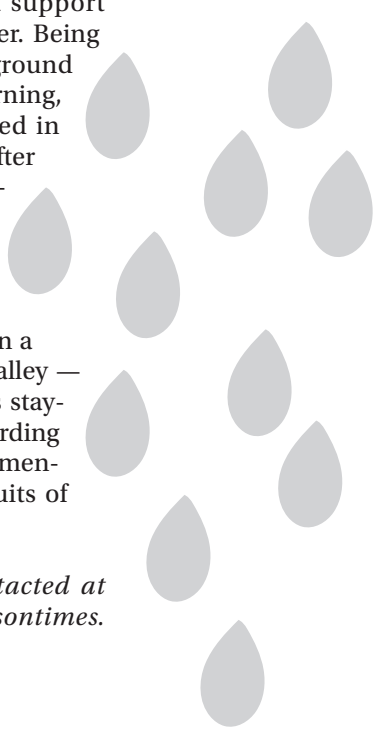
Harvest Program. This program intends to provide hunger relief to the community, with the addition of free pop-up markets hosted in different high-need neighborhoods throughout the valley. The food is provided by growers, farmers and “leftovers” of unsold food purchased by Mountain Roots from farmers markets. In their May 29 grant cycle the Community Foundation of the Gunnison Valley’s COVID Recovery Fund also contributed \$10,000 to the pop-up markets.

“The biggest involvement any at home gardener can have is to just keep gardening and let Mountain Roots be a support in any way we can,” advised Kohler. Being a longtime gardener with a background in education and experiential learning, Kohler was inspired to get involved in food production and cultivation after spending time travelling. He recognized when people connect to their food “it gives them a personal connection to the land and what they’re eating.”

Growing a garden — especially in a harsh climate like the Gunnison Valley — can be tough. But with more of us staying home, the hobby can be a rewarding way to feed the community, boost mental health and enjoy the actual fruits of your labor.

(Morgan Schaefer can be contacted at 970.641.1414 or morgan@gunnisontimes.com.)

Victory gardens are springing up in the Gunnison Valley. Here are some examples of what can be grown.



GET INVOLVED

Visit mountainrootsfoodproject.org to register your Victory Garden and for locations/times for summer Free Markets.

Want to schedule a garden consultation or coordinate a donation? Email sean@mountainrootsfoodproject.org.

CSU-Extension’s Grow & Give project: cmg.extension.colostate.edu/grow-give/

Sowing the seeds of food security



Emily Ogden

The Rec Center garden, one of the earliest Mountain Roots Food Project community gardens, is getting a facelift to help provide food relief for those in need.

Rec Center garden revamp to provide food relief, produce boxes

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The Gunnison Rec Center's community garden was created to host nature-based educational opportunities for children. One of the first Mountain Roots Food Project community gardens, the space has been unused for a number of years.

A partnership between the Gunnison Senior Center and Mountain Roots has spurred a complete revamp of the space to provide fresh produce for seniors and greater food security. The project developed from a surge in gardening interest, the need for fresh, local food and a desire for more intergenerational experiences in the community.

An opening reception kickoff party will take place at the garden today from 4-6 p.m. Free tacos will be provided from Taqueria Nayarit food truck. Volunteers can learn about future events while signing up for workdays.

Items harvested throughout the growing season will be assembled into produce boxes as a part of Mountain Roots' Backyard Harvest program. The garden's bounty will also provide fresh produce for valley seniors through the Senior Center's meal program.

Some structural labor has already taken place by Mountain Roots volunteers and Americorps members. Two Americorps members, Hannah Ryckman with Mountain Roots

KICKOFF RECEPTION

The community is invited to the "Opening Day Celebration" today from 4-6 p.m. at the Rec Center garden. Free tacos and beverages will be provided. Everyone will get a chance to dig in the dirt and sign up for gardening days and workshops.

Visit mountainrootsfoodproject.org/events, email hmorris@gunnisonco.gov or call 970.641.8272 for more information on the event and future events.

Food Security team and Haley Morris with the Senior Center, have been planning how to reinvigorate the garden while involving community volunteers.

"When I first came to this garden, there were huge clumps of grass, rocks — it was rough," Morris said.

Mountain Roots Executive Director Holly Conn and Gunnison Senior Center Coordinator Elizabeth Gillis are co-managers of the initiative.

"This first event is a good time to prepare the beds for the season. People can mingle and hang out, plant some seeds and just have a sense of community," Morris said.

Morris will lead the community engagement angle, such as getting volunteers to the garden and plotting workshop dates. Ryckman manages Mountain Roots' operations at Bill's Park garden and now the Rec Center garden, too.

Conn established the Rec Center garden in 2011 with the help of then-Mountain Roots board member Renee Brekke-Ebbott. They envisioned a youth gardening program with hands-on experiences. It led to

the launch of Mountain Roots' Farm to School program, now a district-wide initiative with Gunnison Watershed schools.

"Everything had its beginnings at the Rec Center Youth Garden," Conn said. "In the early years of Mountain Roots, we were not big enough to house our own programming, so we conducted it through the Gunnison and Crested Butte Parks and Rec departments."

Throughout the season there will be educational workshops for gardening volunteers. Topics will range from native bees, to making compost tea and seed saving protocol. Weekly garden workdays will be targeted to different age groups. Some will bring together elementary students and older adults.

"We're trying to get seniors outside, active and social since they've been very isolated with the pandemic," Morris said. "This is a good opportunity to get involved in the community and learn about gardening, which is such a good thing for mental and physical health."

Morris said the garden will eventually better accommodate older adults by raising beds up higher, eliminating the need to bend over. Benches will be installed for breaks and to encourage socialization.

"This year we're just going to grow food and get people engaged in the space," Ryckman said. "Next year we're going to make larger improvements to the structure of the garden, like focusing on ADA compliance."

Information about the project was distributed this week with Senior Meals packages.

"We'll be running recipe contests where attendees can submit a recipe they want the Senior Center cooks to make," Gillis said. "There will be a cooking workshop at the Senior Center using some of the produce. All fun ways to learn



Hannah Ryckman, left, and Haley Morris shovel dirt to restructure plant beds at the Rec Center garden.

about food production in the community."

Gillis said going forward after this partnership, the Senior Center hopes to continue improving their sourcing for the senior meals program. "We want to be purchasing from farmers and ranchers as much

as we can," Gillis said.

Stay tuned to mountainrootsfoodproject.org/events for future event dates.

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