



Growth Through Gardening: Empowering Communities by Providing Opportunity and Resources



Our motto is: Teach me to garden, and I will eat healthy forever.

In 2017, [it was reported](#) that 40 million people lived in food-insecure households; 9.7 million adults lived in households with very low food security; 6.5 million children lived in households where both children and adults were food-insecure; and 540,000 children (0.7 percent of the nation's children) lived in households in which one or more child experienced very low food security.

Food insecurity refers to a lack of available financial resources for food at the household level. According to [Hunger + Health](#) in partnership with Feeding America, most households in urban communities fall victim to this complex issue. It does not exist in isolation, as low-income families are affected by multiple, overlapping issues like affordable housing, social isolation, health problems, medical costs and low wages. Many do not have what they need to meet basic needs, and these challenges increase a family's risk of food insecurity.

Micro-gardening is empowering!

[Micro-gardening](#) is the practice of cultivating vegetables, herbs, roots and tubers in small spaces. These small spaces may be balconies, patios, rooftops or small yards, and make use of containers—anything from plastic-lined wooden crates and old car tires to plastic buckets, trash cans and wooden pallets. Micro-gardening is a community-focused solution that embraces collaboration between various sectors that share the concern of food disparity. At the same time, it prepares the youth population to tackle challenges the future may bring.

To address food insecurity in our own Pittsburgh community, in partnership with [Latino Health Access](#), ASCI has cultivated a community garden open to residents in surrounding neighborhoods as a resource for families who are food-insecure. The community garden is a peaceful, therapeutic and protected environment utilized to grow food while strengthening the bonds of community, harvesting not only fruits and vegetables, but also longtime relationships.



Latino Health Access has been instrumental in this process, as they provided training to our staff and community leaders on advocacy projects and social determinants of health. But even more valuable were their experiences successfully transforming communities through partnerships and community planning, where all voices are heard to make a community a better place to live. ASCI believes that gaining early knowledge of community needs in order to provide relevant services and identify possible solutions—investing in the community—generates a cycle where there is growth in all directions, leading to enhanced partnerships and healthier communities.

Solutions should not be handed down from a superior entity that determines what is good for a community; rather, a collective of people who understand a community's needs and provide representation should work together to identify real answers. In ASCI's case, we raised questions that guided our community garden project: How can ASCI promote just environmental conditions for the children in the community it serves? What is the level of community interest in achieving environmental rights for children?

On June 15, A Second Chance, Inc., opened its community garden to the public. ASCI's own Toni Wagner and her team led the project and the grand opening was a success. "Gardening takes a lot of planning in order to execute and get the best possible results," Wagner says. "I never suspected that you would have to plan a raised bed design with those things that attract certain insects to keep other insects from eating what you have planted, or know what plants are a deterrent to deer, rabbits, ground hogs and

other animals, and also where to plant them within the beds to keep them away. Even with that, we were told we would still have some plant casualties, but as our skills increase, we can learn from our past mistakes and each year our garden will get stronger.”

The ASCI garden has 10 raised beds in which agency and community volunteers planted peas, green beans, tomatoes, collards, spinach, corn, basil, parsley, melons, onions—a variety of things that will appeal to the whole community. Our goal is for the surrounding community to take ownership of the garden as they see people working within the fence and the vegetables and fruit begin to grow.

“We want to be able to demonstrate how to take what is grown at the end of the growing season and have someone teach healthy meal preparation from the garden to the table,” Wagner says. “This way, it gets the whole family involved in not only the growing and harvesting, but also the cooking. I feel that youth will be more inclined to eat their vegetables if they have a hand in growing them.”

ASCI aims to revitalize its neighborhoods with intentionality, focusing on rebuilding the community’s economic base, advancing social and racial equity, and improving self-esteem and determination, in partnership with community stakeholders. We envision a world where food insecurity and health disparities will no longer be an issue. One day, no family will have to go to bed hungry because they couldn’t afford to eat. All families will be able to live healthy and sustainable lives.



Creating Your Own Micro-Garden

[To create your own micro-garden](#), start with a warm, sunny windowsill (direct sunlight from a south-facing window is ideal) and a small, clean container. Plastic take-out dishes and disposable pie plates work well, as do clear fruit or salad boxes. If your chosen container doesn't have built-in drainage, poke a few drainage holes in the bottom. Add an inch or two of moistened potting soil or mix. In a small space, the list of vegetables you can grow is based on size. Preferably, microgreens and small vegetables are grown to achieve the highest yield for the space.

[These vegetables include:](#) dwarf bok choy, Romeo baby carrots, Fino verde basil, Jingle Bell peppers, fairy tale eggplant, Red Robin tomatoes, baby cucumbers, baby spinach, several lettuces, corn and much more. A well-tended, 11-square-foot micro-garden can produce as much as 200 tomatoes a year, 36 heads of lettuce every 60 days, 10 cabbages every 90 days and a whopping 100 onions every four months.