

# Utica Unity Gardens Offer a Welcome Urban Retreat



*Utica Unity South Community Garden*

As the sun's dappled light dances across the garden, honey bees drink the nectar and dew from the morning glories, a Monarch butterfly flits from flower to flower, and young squirrels busy themselves trying to scale sunflowers growing in the summer heat at the Utica Unity Gardens.

This community garden project takes vacant lots (Brownfields) and transforms them into usable, green space to encourage



*Students install hoops for micro-greens project*

community socialization, improve access to healthy fruits and vegetables for residents living in food deserts, promote exercise through gardening, and foster neighborhood beautification and revitalization.

The community garden project currently consists of nine, unique gardening sites of various sizes in two low income neighborhoods of Cornhill and West Utica. The gardens support many local residents and can be found at Women, Infants, and Children; the Utica Rescue Mission; the Salvation Army's meal site; Kennedy Plaza

Apartments, a low income housing project; Sculpture Space; the Utica Public Library; and along Park Avenue.

The largest garden, Utica Unity South, offers one hundred raised garden beds for residents' use, and a garden demonstration area that is under development. It will feature a growing display of 32 different vegetables, a hoops demonstration project to examine extending the gardening season, a Victorian gazebo, a hops display, and a walking path. The Parks Conservancy recently installed an urban orchard, and berry bushes will be planted this fall.

## Community Reaps What it Sows

The project team developed a Summer Children's Gardening program that supports 140 children at four gardening sites. Pre-school to grade six children learn gardening basics including planting, watering, harvesting, and composting while caring for their own plants in their own raised bed garden plots. Children's gardening journals were developed in partnership with SUNY Polytechnical Institute Food & Culture classes, and the project also provides internships to local college students interested in urban planning and landscape architecture.

The project offers free beginning adult horticulture and micro-greens growing classes in English, Spanish, and other languages spoken by recently resettled refugees, to encourage gardening. It supports entry level employment opportunities for low income and limited English proficiency residents in area greenhouses and home gardening supply stores by providing a 10 hour certificate program in horticulture.

The project team partners with the Mohawk Valley Youth Build program to provide work site training in garden construction and landscaping to youth 18-24 who are completing their high school equivalency diploma requirements while gaining job skills.

In partnership with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Oneida County, it provides Master Gardener students to support the children's programming and garden sites. Two Eat Smart New York nutritionists provide nutrition education, and live cooking

demonstrations at the gardens to educate residents on healthy and low cost snacking through a Garden Talks program.



*Creating a peace pole*

In addition to support to the NYSDOH from the CDC's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, the project is supported by the CDC's Environmental Public Health Tracking Program, City of Utica's Parks Department, the Parks Conservancy, the Utica Public Library, the Mohawk Valley Resource Center for Refugees, and various private philanthropies including area landscaping firms, nurseries, and foundations.



*Community partners celebrate completion of the children's garden at Utica Public Library*

*Contributed by Cathe Bullwinkle, NYSDOH, Outreach & Education*

## In the Field of Environmental Health

is issued by the NYS DOH Center for Environmental Health

Empire State Plaza - Corning Tower, Room 1642  
Albany, New York 12237

(518) 402-7530, FAX (518) 402-7539

[ceheduc@health.ny.gov](mailto:ceheduc@health.ny.gov)

Back issues of *In the Field* are posted on the Health Commerce System, or contact us for copies.

**Special thanks to our contributors**