

CASE STUDY

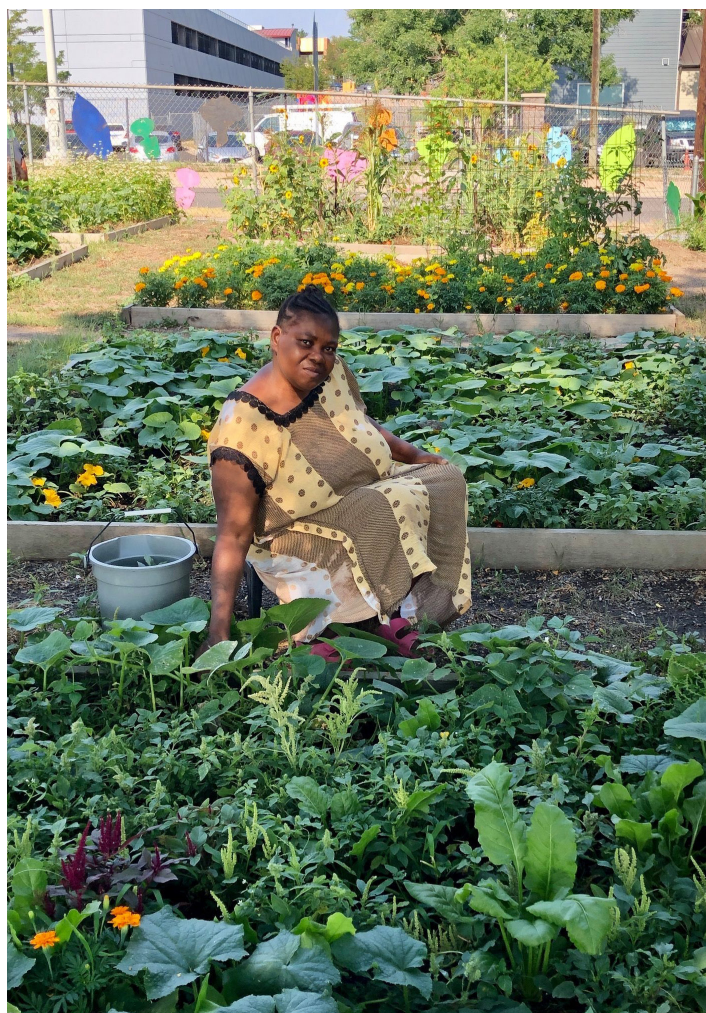
ADAPTING FOOD WASTE PREVENTION MESSAGING FOR DENVER URBAN GARDENS

When we think of food waste, we don't typically think of community gardens. However, perfectly good, fresh produce grown in community gardens occasionally ends up as compost for a range of reasons, including growing too much of a certain thing or letting produce sit on the plant for too long, rendering it inedible. This is true in city gardens across the country, including in Denver.

Denver Urban Gardens (DUG), a local nonprofit, was established in 1985 to help residents create sustainable, food-producing neighborhood gardens. Over the past 35+ years, its network of community plots has grown across six metro Denver counties, and its activities have extended to offering youth education and community training programs as well as providing access to seeds, seedlings, and educational resources to build community resilience.

Although many community gardeners are aware of food waste issues, DUG still sees an excessive amount of fresh food going to waste in its gardens. In spring of 2020, as part of a local capacity grant from the NRDC Food Matters program, DUG launched an effort to incorporate food waste messaging into its programmatic work and to gather feedback about the effectiveness of that messaging among gardeners and supporters. Over the course of 2020, DUG successfully integrated food waste education into seven key programs, including its Urban Roots Garden Education workshops, which reached 120 participants. It also sent flyers with information on reducing food waste to all 1,465 members of the Grow a Garden food access program.

At the same time, DUG solicited feedback from its members to evolve and add nuance to the food waste discussion. On the basis of this feedback, an expanded view on what counts as food "waste" in gardens emerged. Participants pointed out that while plants provide us with food, that is too narrow a view of all that they achieve in nature. Food that isn't harvested from a plant can provide nutrients to the soil, and foliage serves as habitat for insects and small animals over winter. Acknowledging that viewpoint, DUG committed to including solutions that embrace this perspective.



© Hanna Buchenau, DUG

Additionally, DUG's core mission is to serve the communities that are most impacted by food insecurity and environmental injustice through community building, experiential learning, and promotion of healthy eating habits. DUG learned that the food waste discussion it had initiated in the community often felt incomplete outside of a larger ecosystem discussion. In response, in addition to incorporating food waste prevention education, DUG deepened its commitment to understanding the rich cultural knowledge of stories, songs, recipes and practices that go along with traditional foodways and growing food in a particular place. A final learning was that the act of gardening itself can be a food waste prevention strategy, as the more people are aware of what it takes to grow food, the less likely they are to waste it.

Through this process, DUG realized that there is more it can do to make community members aware of the food waste problem and equip them with strategies to reduce waste at every point in the food production process. DUG's approach

to discussing food waste with the community has evolved into these basic principles:

- Root the discussion in the problem and scale of food waste.
- Discuss different ways of thinking about solutions.
- Offer resources for deeper learning.
- Encourage group brainstorming or a sharing of experiences focused on behavior or mind-set changes that can be effective in curbing personal food waste and food waste from gardens.

Overall, DUG received overwhelmingly positive feedback around the food waste prevention discussions, especially for its willingness to engage with the community and adapt its messaging accordingly. The importance of soliciting feedback and being open to evolving messaging to meet the needs of the community is a key lesson for organizations and municipalities across the country that may be exploring what kind of food waste messaging resonates with their specific audience.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: DUG'S TO-GROW BOX PROGRAM

© Violeta García



During the COVID-19 crisis, conversations around food systems, access, equity, and food insecurity grew tremendously, particularly in neighborhoods that experienced food shortages and supply disruption. DUG contributed to that conversation with the development of a new food access program aimed at mobilizing the community to grow more of its own food.

In addition to its long-standing Grow a Garden program, in 2020 DUG launched its emergency To-Grow Box program, a perfect-for-beginners garden kit that combined seeds, seedlings, and a bilingual plant care guide. By following the guide, users could grow enough veggies and herbs in a 10-by-10-foot plot to support the nutritional needs of a family of four from summer into fall. The guide also contained tips for successful growing, a custom and transitional plot plan, and recipes for meals utilizing harvested produce.

"This is not just for fun; this is because it's essential for people's lives," said Brittany Pimentel, DUG's equity and food access director. Many of DUG's 180-plus gardens are in underserved Denver-Aurora neighborhoods hit hardest by the pandemic by several measures,

including health, access to enough food, and job loss. "I'm hopeful that the To-Grow Boxes will be an empowering step for communities to find resiliency in this time of crisis and beyond," she added.

In 2020, DUG distributed 1,000 To-Grow Boxes to metro area individuals and families, handing out more than 20,000 seedlings and 10,000 seed packets. The Grow a Garden program will remain a core DUG program beyond the pandemic.