

Addiction Recovery, Gardening, and Faith: The Garden of Allan

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ABSTRACT The Garden of Allan is far from the Garden of Eden, but God, the first and ultimate gardener is there. Teen Challenge (TC), a faith-based, residential drug and alcohol rehabilitation program on 10 acres of land in rural Saskatchewan near the town of Allan. What began with a simple church bulletin, with a notice saying that Teen Challenge needed donations of fruits and vegetables lead to the development of an active gardening and food project at the centre. What could have been a simple donation developed into a project that has dramatically changed the life of the volunteer coordinator, and the lives of several students in the program. In addition to developing their faith, and using their faith to overcome their addictions, the TC program emphasizes community living, life skills, health and recreation, music, art, and character development. Gardening and food related activities are valuable life skills, are part of a healthy and healing lifestyle, and further develop the student's faith. Gardening activities can be extremely therapeutic in relieving stresses including depression and anxiety, which are common in the lives of those struggling with alcohol and drug addiction. Gardening can also be extremely rewarding, yielding food for sustenance, success, achievement, validation, and prayers answered. In the Garden of Allan, gardening is both indoor and outdoor. During inclement times of the year, the students grow nutrient dense microgreens that are proven beneficial in repairing damage caused by drugs and alcohol. The Garden of Allan is where faith and gardens grow.

KEYWORDS gardening, addictions rehabilitation, Teen Challenge

There are many dimensions of engagement that can involve faculty, community, and possibly students in mutual learning, growth and change. This paper reports on a gardening project that involved a faculty member, to a lesser degree some of his students, and a drug and alcohol rehabilitation community. The creation of the Garden of Allan at Teen Challenge Saskatchewan, a small residential centre for men with alcohol and drug addictions near Allan, Saskatchewan - 60 kilometers east of Saskatoon - is the project reported in this paper.

In this example of community engagement, a University of Saskatchewan (UofS) faculty member initiated a vegetable garden at Teen Challenge Saskatchewan, with input from two of his students. The faculty member, who is also the garden coordinator, teaches Plant Science 235: Urban Agriculture, a course he developed to promote food production in urban and small-scale settings. The capstone course assignment requires the students to create a proposal

for an urban agriculture project. The previous year the professor had become involved with Teen Challenge through his church. He recognized that Teen Challenge offered an opportunity for his students to develop a plan for a garden and orchard for this community.

The students were familiar with the work of this rehab centre, were interested in the healing effects gardens can have for recovering addicts, and accepted the idea to develop a proposal for their project proposal. They researched the effects of gardening and healing for recovering addicts, and applied this research knowledge to the project when developing the garden design and recommendations. During the course the students had developed a strong base of knowledge about growing fruits and vegetables and knew how to draw a garden layout. They also created a growing schedule and recommended suitable plants. The students chose not to volunteer at Teen Challenge or become involved in the implementation of the plan.

Thus the garden coordinator became the students' advocate and worked directly with the centre to move forward on the development of the students' proposals. He also became the teacher of the skills needed to prepare, plant, maintain, and harvest a vegetable garden. However, it did not end there. The benefits in building and maintaining the garden were many: the physical work, the awe of watching plants emerge and grow, the nurturing of the plants, and finally the harvest. However, the benefits continued much further when they had an impact on healthier diets for the recovering addicts/residents, and improved food security for the centre.

As a result of seeing the centre's residents benefit so much from this engagement by the university professor and his students, and because the professor/garden coordinator was moved by the practical and spiritual impact this particular proposal had on the residents and himself, he was inspired to describe it for others. For him it represents the best of good engagement: the enactment of values engendered through faith, contributing to healing and greater social equality for all.

The Garden of Allan shares qualities in common with the Garden of Eden. Out of uncultivated prairie soil, a bountiful vegetable garden was developed and provided a rich harvest. As with the biblical garden, the Garden of Allan provided knowledge, in this case knowledge of good gardening practices and established a base of knowledge for the continuance of it into the future. Additionally, it gave residents a space for reflection that provided inner insight that was sometimes spiritual. The garden was also a place of light, as was the Garden of Eden; for the residents who have encountered some of the darkest sides of life, these feelings of light and spirituality were particularly meaningful.

Teen Challenge Saskatchewan

Teen Challenge Saskatchewan (Teen Challenge, n.d.a) is a residential 12-month Christian-based program for men and women. Their mission is "To help men and women overcome substance addictions to lead full and productive lives" (Teen Challenge, n.d.c). The first Teen Challenge centre was started more than 50 years ago and targeted street youth in New York (Teen Challenge, n.d.b). Today, Teen Challenge operates more than 1,000 centres in 82 countries (Teen Challenge, n.d.b), giving it a strong claim to being the largest and most

successful faith-based drug treatment program in the world. Teen Challenge is open to any individual, 18 years of age and older. As a registered Canadian charity Teen Challenge relies on donations, sponsorship, and volunteers to offer programs that help residents regain their lives. The program is voluntary – participants enter the program by choice and can choose to leave the program at any time, but are encouraged to stay for one year, at which time they “graduate.” Teen Challenge offers spiritual, academic, and vocational training, and encourages the residents to discover their own creativity, skills, and talents.

Urban Agriculture

The city of Saskatoon has a population of about 250,000 people and is located on the Canadian prairies, a region with a deep connection to farming. In the mid-1900s, the majority of the population was only one generation removed from their farm roots, so growing food in backyards in rural and urban communities was part of the prairie culture. As the population base shifted along with increasing demands on people’s time and an ability to easily purchase food, urban backyard gardens gave way to low-maintenance landscaping and a stronger interest in showy gardens. With every generation, we became further removed from our agriculture roots, and knowing how our food is produced.

In the past decade we have seen a resurgence, dare we say a revival, in urban agriculture, defined as the growing of plants and raising of livestock within and around cities (FAO, n.d.), for personal consumption, donation and/or sale. One can see an increase in the number of front yard garden boxes planted with vegetables, community gardens, and urban market gardens - just a few examples illustrating the growing popularity of urban agriculture in Saskatoon. Fuelled by an increasing number of people across North America who want to rediscover how to grow fruits and vegetables in urban centres, a course titled Urban Agriculture was developed at the UofS six years ago. In the first year, 20 students enrolled; today the course attracts the limit of 100 students per year, which speaks to the growing interest in urban agriculture.

The Engaged Student

To engage students in real-life situations, the Urban Agriculture course requires students to develop a proposal that asks them to select an organization or group and develop a project or activity that is related to food production. They then send the proposal to the organization/group, encouraging them to adopt it. The proposal requires an articulation of their knowledge and what they can bring to this engagement, rather than cutting and pasting information from the internet or regurgitating class notes. In 2014, two students took on the professor’s suggestion to develop a proposal for the Teen Challenge men’s centre near Allan: one student proposed a design for a vegetable garden, the second proposed a design for an orchard. At this point the urban agriculture students involvement ended. However, they were excited and pleased by the acceptance of their proposals. The garden coordinator became the advocate of the student’s garden proposal, which was accepted by the centre, and began to work with the centre in the implementation of the garden proposal.

One reason these two proposals were important was because the centre relies on donations,

and therefore had challenges with providing nutritious food to the residents. As part of their rehabilitation, residents participate in the purchasing and preparation of food, and through both lack of knowledge and experience tend not to consider nutrition. Residents can be particularly neglectful of vegetables and fruits, foods that provide some of the most important nutrients in a healthy diet.

The garden proposal, which gave details on crops to grow based on yield, usability, and nutrition has been implemented, while the orchard is still under consideration.

Subjective “Data” Collection

The garden coordinator chose not to create a formal, quantitative research structure when assessing the development of the garden and the impact it had on the residents’ recovery. The life of a person struggling with a drug and/or alcohol addiction is far from normal, and the point of the garden was to introduce normalcy into the men’s lives. Thus the coordinator was reluctant to impose survey methodology onto the project and the men. Any “data” collected was subjective and obtained through regular conversations with the residents while working together in the garden.

For many residents, the garden was their refuge, a place where they could just “be” without being judged or evaluated. Teen Challenge maintains a continuous intake to and exit of residents from the program. Some exits occur rapidly, making it difficult to debrief residents who had participated in the garden project before leaving the program. The project was an optional activity, and drew limited participation among the residents who had no previous gardening experience. For those who did participate in the garden, it often had both positive and negative elements. Common positive thoughts about the garden often included working in other gardens with their own grandmas. Common negative memories were of weeding a huge garden and never reaching the end before having to do it again, and again.

The Garden of Allan

To encourage the Teen Challenge residents to take ownership of the garden, they were asked to select the vegetables they wanted to grow, but other vegetables suggested by the urban agriculture student who created the plan were also included. Seeds, transplants, tools and watering equipment were all donated. Operating principles for the garden were established:

- all residents were welcomed,
- mutual respect was demanded from all,
- residents would be taught about food production while in the garden,
- lack of knowledge and/or experience is a non-issue, and
- no question or action was considered dumb.

At the end of the first year, the garden coordinator deemed the project a success: it had honed gardening skills in the participating residents and it had yielded a large amount of food to help feed the centre residents.

Spirituality and Gardening

Is there a connection between spirituality and gardening? Spirituality is commonly defined as connection to a higher power than ourselves (Centre for Spirituality and Healing, n.d.a). That higher power may be found in places of worship such as churches, or in fields, forests, gardens, or wherever the individual finds comfort and a meaningful connection (Centre for Spirituality and Healing, n.d.a). When in the garden, did the residents encounter or feel the presence of a higher power? Hill et al. (2000) argue that people often confuse spirituality with satisfaction and wellbeing. They contend that unless the person experiences a greater power while gardening, then the person is simply finding great joy and fulfillment while gardening, which is not spirituality. Given that Teen Challenge is a Christian/faith-based rehab program and that the residents become very familiar with the Bible during their program, it stands to reason that residents would probably encounter spiritual moments while in the garden. Through conversations with the participating residents, some indicated they definitely experienced a connection with a higher power while working in the garden.

Some residents who had chosen not to work in the garden still spent a lot of time in the garden playing music and praying. Again this was because of the feeling that a higher power was present in that garden. On the other hand, there were residents who spent time in the garden, simply to occupy time in their day, to be outside in the fresh air, or to munch on vegetables straight from the garden, but found only joy and fulfillment.

Unruh and Hutchinson (2011) propose that it is common to feel connected to a higher power while working in a garden, because gardeners nurture plants. Parallel is that the concept of nurturing is found in many passages in the Christian Bible. In their study, some participants found a connection between caring and responding to the care (Unruh & Hutchinson, 2011). Similar feelings were expressed by residents at the Garden of Allan – some residents felt that nurturing plants during tough times – drought and wind and cold – was symbolized for them being nurtured by a higher power during their own tough times – addiction recovery. Is there a connection between spirituality and gardening – for some residents, the answer is absolutely yes.

Gardening and spirituality metaphors were common conversation pieces while tending the Garden of Allan. One particularly memorable comparison was made between drug addicts and tomato blossom end rot. A resident likened himself to blossom end rot, which eventually destroys the entire fruit, just as drug addicts eventually destroying everything around them. He further noted that tomatoes with blossom end rot are discarded, just as drug addicts are too often discarded from society. Another resident responded by pointing out that if the bad section of the fruit was removed, the rest of the fruit was saved just as if the drugs and alcohol are removed, the addict can be saved.

Nutrition and Addiction

The importance of nutrition on the recovery of those suffering from substance abuse cannot be overemphasized. This is a complex and specialized scientific area of study. Addicts seldom eat at regular times, seldom follow a nutritious diet (Salz, 2014), have a lower than normal

consumption of fruits and vegetables than the general public (Nabipour, et al., 2014) and are more likely to consume energy-dense but not nutrient-dense foods (Salz, 2014). So it is common for Teen Challenge residents to arrive in a nutritionally deficient state. In addition, certain addictive substances have a negative impact on the metabolism and digestion of foods consumed (Salz, 2014), further stressing their damaged bodies. Deficiencies in minerals and vitamins, common in individuals suffering from substance abuse (Islam, et al., 2002 ; Nabipour, et al., 2014) can negatively impact all body systems. Therefore it is important that Teen Challenge residents consume a balanced diet, rich in both macro- and micro-nutrients (Grotzkyj-Giorgi, 2009), many of which are found in fruits and vegetables.

Teen Challenge relies on food and funding donations to purchase food, and the residents in charge of purchasing food may not necessarily make the best nutritional choices, so the diet at Teen Challenge was not always as balanced as it needed to be for recovering addicts. One of the desired outcomes of the Garden of Allan was for the residents to produce some of their own fruits and vegetables necessary to help in their own recovery. To further assist in supplying a balanced, nutritionally dense diet, the growing of microgreens was introduced.

Microgreens are seedlings at a stage of growth between a sprout (cotyledons but no true leaves) and baby greens (2–4 sets of leaves). They contain much of the nutrition needed for a healthy diet (Xiao, Lester, Luo, & Wang, 2012) and thus a diet suitable for addiction recovery. Gardening in Saskatchewan is restricted due to our short growing season, however the growing of microgreens is best done indoors, so it gives the residents access to fresh nutrient-dense greens year round.

Connecting Food to Recovery

Understanding the importance of diet on recovery, prompted the garden coordinator to suggest an expansion of the garden project after the first year. The garden was designed as a sustenance garden – similar to the “back 40” a common name given to the large sustenance garden on the farm. The Garden of Allan was designed to optimize food production, yet many of the residents could not connect vegetables in the garden with the entrée on the dinner plate. The lifestyle of a drug addict often does not involve cooking or meal preparation, so those residents cooking the meals were encouraged to help harvest the vegetables in the garden, and the residents working in the garden were encouraged to also harvest the vegetables and work in the kitchen. Additionally, simple yet satisfying vegetable-based recipes were made available. This excited the residents and they began asking if they could grow specific fruits and vegetables they had found in the recipes. One memorable moment was watching a young man harvest tomatoes, onions, garlic, and herbs, take them into the kitchen, make pasta sauce, and then enjoy his creation. The look of pride and accomplishment on his face will forever remain with the lead author. Gardening is about more than just the food.

Conclusion

The Garden of Allan was initiated at the Teen Challenge men's centre as a way to introduce the recovering alcohol and drug addict to gardening and food. Based on the number of men who participated in developing and nurturing the garden, compared to the potential number of men who could have participated, the project may not have been seen as a success since less than 15% of the residents participated in the project. However, those who did participate in the garden were rewarded with a large volume of vegetables that were consumed by all. These gardeners also found personal success, achievement, and validation, which tended to be lacking in their lives until then. To feel good about yourself and what you have accomplished was a desired outcome of the project, and it was achieved. The residents also reported finding an enhanced development in their faith through working or just being in the garden. The costs associated with the garden to the centre were minimal and were raised through donations. The benefits to the centre were numerous:

- production of a large volume of nutritionally dense food, so essential to the addiction recovery process,
- development of a dedicated garden area,
- acquisition of tools, equipment, and a knowledge base for sustaining the garden,
- affirmation of faith,
- sense of accomplishment and validation for participants,
- acquisition of life skills - participants will always be able to garden in the future.

Benefits were not restricted to the residents. The project had a huge impact on the professor/garden coordinator. My faith was solid before the project began but has grown by leaps and bounds while working with the residents at the centre. My teaching has shifted to include more emphasis on the non-food related aspects of urban agriculture, and my involvement has led to proposals targeted to other drug rehabilitation programs, mental services programs, and incarceration programs in Western Canada.

Individuals in rehabilitation programs need a wide variety of help and support systems to reinforce their recovery. But without the work and motivation to overcome their addictions, which are deeply rooted in their psychological histories, the external support alone will not work.

Providing recovering addicts with an opportunity to open themselves to an engagement in an activity that, in turn, can open them to spiritual discovery is a powerful support to the strength they need to facilitate self-healing. Gardening, growing food, nourishing oneself is one such opportunity. As noted studies (Hill et al., 2000; Unruh, & Hutchinson, 2011) support the spiritual aspects of a seemingly practical, even aesthetic activity. One's faith, or strengthening of faith supports not only personal growth in all participants but also creates socially innovative programs that contribute to the common good in both an immediate and long-term sense.

The Garden of Eden, was a healing and bountiful place that also contained the duality of

light and darkness. Like Eden the Garden of Allen contains lightness, bounty, and provides opportunities on the spiritual and practical plane for residents to overcome their personal darkness. It is true that the Garden of Allan grows plants, but it also grows faith, success, reward, achievement, and self-worth.

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