

GREEN SOURCE

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Community gardens teach sustainable practice

By Julie Thibodeaux

Clarice Abuto doesn't let anything go to waste when it comes to gardening. The hired caretaker for the Como Community Garden in Fort Worth not only teaches residents and volunteers how to grow black-eyed peas, okra and greens, she shows them how to garden the "natural way."

For Abuto, a Kenya native and former TCU student, sustainable farming is nothing new. She grew up using only organic methods, making use of natural resources on hand, such as grass clippings, dried leaves and fruit rinds. A novel idea for some, she observed. "You Americans sweep your yards like you clean your houses," she joked.



The Como Community Garden, started in 2009 by Opening Doors for Women in Need, a nonprofit whose outreach extends beyond helping women, is just one of several community gardens sprouting up in Tarrant County. They're teaching locals not only the value of growing their own food but how to do so using sustainable methods.

Instead of chemical fertilizers, Abuto enhances her soil with homemade compost, including coffee grounds collected from a local Starbucks. Marigolds were planted to repel pests and a bird feeder was added to keep birds from eating tomatoes. (Sandra Stanley, founder of Opening Doors for Women in Need, and Clarice Abuto, garden caretaker. Photo by Karl Thibodeaux)

This spring, children from nearby Como Elementary School installed a keyhole garden, a traditional African structure. Abuto showed them how to build up the curved-shaped bed with multiple layers of hay, compost and top soil with a built-in compost pile in the center. The result is a waist-high garden that is easy for kids to reach, produces few weeds and captures children's imaginations. "It introduces them to gardening that is not too hard," said Abuto. In addition, professional landscaper Elizabeth Samudio was brought in to design permaculture garden beds that use berms and basins along with trees to attract and hold water. Samudio also created a whimsical spiral garden, a raised bed built with empty bottles buried in the dirt to create a design that collects and retains water.

Back at her Fort Worth store, Elizabeth Anna's Old World Garden, Samudio offers her own community garden where members of the 2 Hands Urban Gardener Program meet throughout the year. Members of the program pay \$100 to be tutored in sustainable farming practices. They learn not only about organic gardening and water conservation but also how to raise chickens and keep bees.

Nearby, the Fairmount Community Garden, located in a revitalized neighborhood south of downtown Fort Worth, offers an all-organic garden, with 76 plots, leased for \$35 a year.



And just north of Fort Worth, organic gardening is required at the Common Grounds Community Garden in North Richland Hills. Dianne Spradling, a Master Gardener who oversees the garden started last fall, said being good stewards of the earth is an integral part of its mission. The acre-site, which leases 74 plots to residents for \$40 a year, features a composting area, rain barrels, four Texas native plant demonstration gardens and a tool shed stocked with organic products. "It's a place where anybody can come and learn the environmental healthy way to do things." (Photo by Karl Thibodeaux)

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