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One-Square-Yard Farming

Groundwork Project Promotes Local Growing, Healthy Eating

BY VIRGINIA AVNIEL SPATZ

One square yard is sufficient to create an urban “farm,” according to Groundwork Anacostia River DC, and Groundwork encourages community members to join a new “One Yard of Garden” experiment. Groundwork and partner organizations are preparing to transform lawns and vacant lots across wards 7 and 8 into edible landscape. A produce cooperative will ensure that participating gardeners share a variety of vegetables, fruits, herbs and spices. Related programs will offer food preservation, canning and healthy cooking tips. In addition, these tiny gardens can make a big difference to the local environment.

“Lawns are next to concrete and asphalt, in terms of storm water runoff,” says Groundwork’s executive director, Dennis Chestnut. Storm water does not naturally soak into the ground through asphalt, concrete and other impervious surfaces – including many lawns – common in urban areas. Instead, when storm water hits such surfaces, it rapidly carries dirt, chemicals and pollutants into storm sewers or directly into streams and rivers. In addition, grass is often treated with pesticides and fertilizers, which is then carried into our water sources, too. Transforming even a small portion of an existing lawn or concrete slab into a garden can slow down runoff and help enrich the land, Chestnut explains.

‘One Yard of Garden’

Groundwork has developed a procedure that will produce “specialty crops” in spaces as small as 3 feet by 3 feet. These can be developed in an existing lawn or garden, or in a bed placed on a patio, deck or other surface. Beds can be raised for wheelchair-using gardeners.

The produce of each garden will be quantified and tallied as part of an urban agriculture research project, Chestnut explains. The research is funded by the US Department of Agriculture and administered through the University of the District of Columbia, which serves in place of a “state agricultural agency” for this purpose. Groundwork is one of three DC groups chosen to participate in the USDA research.

The grant will support 22 gardens begun over the course of three years. The first eight – all to be planted east of the river – will launch this year. Grant-supported participants will be selected from those who attend the required Rooting DC 2010 workshop on Feb. 20 (details below).

Supporting the project will be a demonstration plot in the Fort Dupont community garden. Groundwork will also use UDC’s farm and previously unoccupied greenhouse in Beltsville, Md., to start seedlings, so they are ready to be planted once the new garden plots are ready – probably in early March.

Juliette Tahar, of Healthy Living Inc., will teach food preparation as well as canning and other preservation techniques. She has been offering cooking classes – stressing use of vegetables and other raw foods – at the Richard England Boys and Girls Club (4103 Benning Road NE). Groundwork hopes the club will establish “One Yard of Garden” so that lessons can be extended from seed to meal.

Tanikka Cunningham, of DC Healthy Solutions Inc., has been working in Ward 7 on wholesale distribution of organic foods. She will work with “One Yard of Garden” to create a cooperative distribution plan for participants. This will ensure that participants get a variety of foods and that no farmer is stuck with an overabundance of any one item.

Free Gardening Workshop

Any individual interested in “One Yard of Garden” must attend a day-long workshop – 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. – on Feb. 20; groups must send a representative. “Rooting DC 2010,” an annual urban gardening forum, is free and open to the public, at the Historical Society of DC, 801 K St. NW. Registration is required. Free childcare is available with advance registration. Call 202-638-1649 or visit www.rootingdc.org to register.

To participate in the “One Yard of Garden” project, register at the Groundwork Anacostia DC table during the Feb. 20 workshop. Decisions on research participants will be made the following week.

Groundwork will not turn away anyone who is committed to beginning a tiny urban farm, however, says Chestnut. The organization is also contacting businesses for in-kind donations and pursuing other funding options to support additional gardeners. Moreover, Chestnut says, “Everyone who attends the workshop will come away with knowledge as well as supplies, like gloves and seeds.”

“Our goal is to jumpstart urban gardening east of the river,” Chestnut concludes. “We are very fortunate to have gotten this grant and are looking forward to incorporating this research project into Groundwork’s overall focus – to improve the quality of life and the natural environments in our communities.”

Contact Groundwork Anacostia River DC through Facebook, GroundworkAnacostia@gmail.com or 202-286-4970. For more information about Healthy Living Inc., visit healthylivinginc.org. To reach DC Healthy Solutions, call 1-888-415-COOP (2667) or e-mail tcunningham@healthysolutionsgroup.org. ★