

Providing Support for Community Gardens

Aufdenberg, D.I.*¹

*Horticulture Specialist, University of Missouri Extension, Jackson, MO 63755, aufdenbergd@missouri.edu;

INTRODUCTION

Community gardens continue to expand as effective strategies for addressing food insecurity, food deserts, and rising food costs. Many participants also rely on these shared spaces due to limited growing areas at home. When adequately supported, community gardens can increase access to fresh vegetables, improve consumption habits, promote physical activity, enhance overall well-being, and strengthen community connectedness.

From 2024 to 2025, targeted efforts were made to enhance the success of gardeners participating in community gardens across the Southeast Region of Missouri. Support included educational programs, technical assistance, and the opportunity to receive plants and seeds. The overall purpose of this initiative was to improve gardening outcomes, expand access to fresh produce, and equip participating gardeners with the knowledge and resources needed to sustain productive garden spaces.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A key component of the project involves training Master Gardeners in starting seeds, transplant production, and growing vegetables. Their involvement enhances local capacity to grow and distribute healthy vegetable transplants free of charge to community garden sites and promote gardening knowledge.

Trained Extension faculty, staff, and Master Gardeners collaborate directly with garden leaders, volunteers and garden participants, offering:

- **Ongoing education** through hands-on training in seed starting and vegetable gardening using University of Missouri resources.
- **Seeds and plants** of reliable vegetable varieties adapted to Missouri's climate to support successful garden production.
- **Youth education opportunities** emphasizing hands-on learning.
- **Collaborative support** providing technical support, problem solving, and plant delivery to garden sites.

University of Missouri Extension Guides offered:

- MU Guide G6201 Vegetable Planting Calendar
- MU Guide G6226 Vegetable Harvest and Storage
- MU Guide G6470 Growing Herbs at Home
- MU Guide G6570 Starting Plants Indoors from Seeds

PROGRAM OUTCOMES

Outcomes 2024:

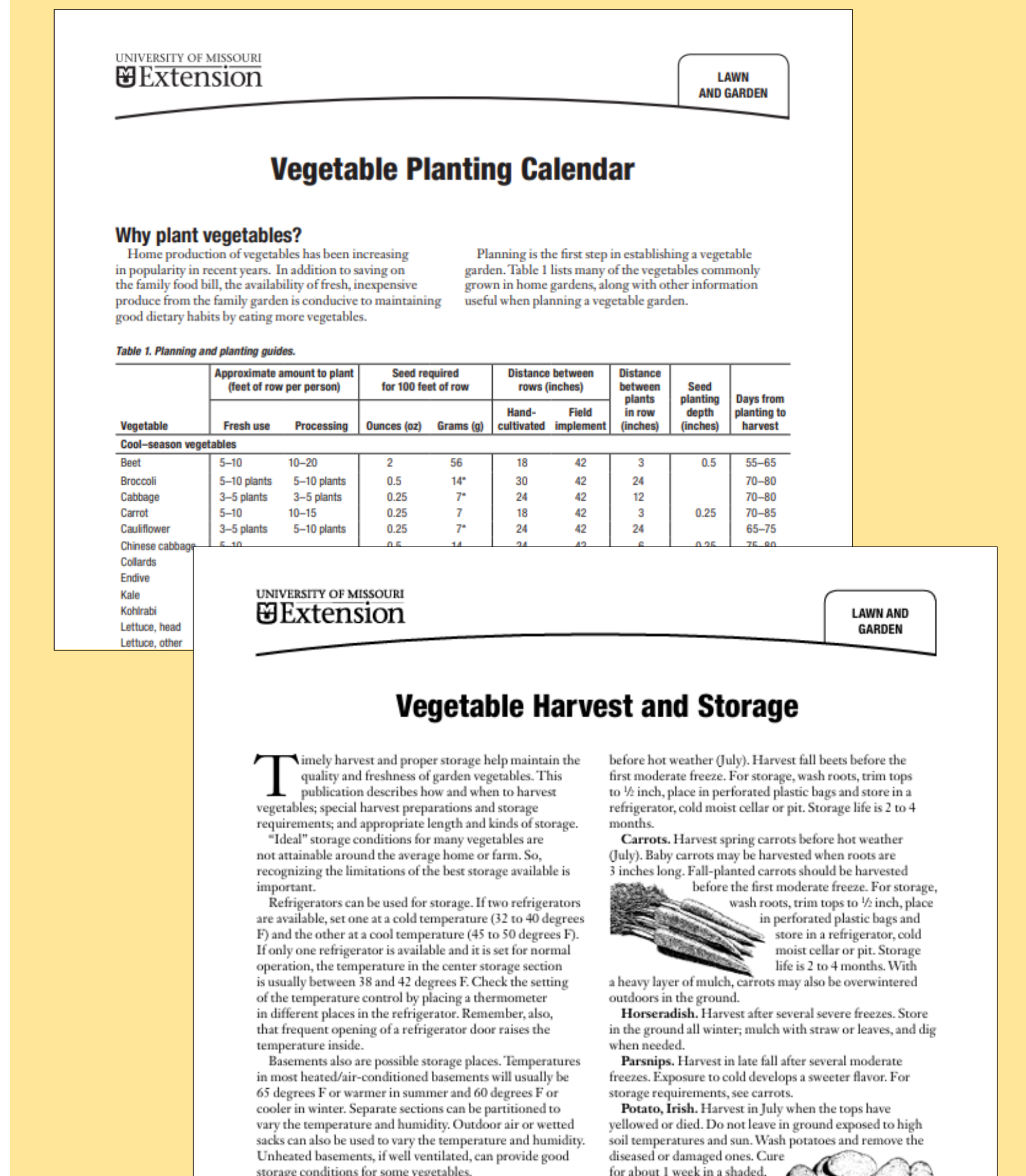
- 405+ families received fresh vegetables grow in 19 area community gardens.
- 1,051 vegetable and herb plants were distributed to community garden participants across the Southeast Region of Missouri. Included: tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers, zucchini, cabbage, broccoli, basil, various greens and more.
- Over 1,000 pounds of produce was donated to six food pantries, senior programs, and church outreach initiatives.
- 14 master gardeners trained to grow transplants and assist community garden operations.
- Eight educational events (workshops and small-group classes) were delivered.
- Seven technical visits/consultations provided direct assistance to community gardens.

Outcomes 2025:

- 508+ families received fresh vegetables grown in 23 area community gardens.
- 2,806 vegetable and herb plants were given to community garden participants in the Southeast Region of Missouri. Plant selection was the same as 2024.
- Over 1,550 pounds of produce was donated to eight food pantries, senior programs, and church outreach initiatives.
- 22 Master Gardeners trained to grow transplants and assist community garden operations.
- 13 educational events (workshops and small group classes) were delivered.
- 12 technical visits/consultations provided direct assistance to community gardens.
- Expanded access to gardening materials and knowledge, increasing food security and community well-being across Missouri



Various events: (a) Master Gardener Workshop; (b) Greenhouse plants; (c) Hands-on learning with Extension staff; (d) Community garden workshop; (e) Working in the community garden in Sikeston, MO.



Guides given at workshops to help them during the growing season.

PROGRAM IMPACTS

Learning Impacts

- 100% of Master Gardeners indicated an increase in knowledge of growing transplants in a greenhouse
- 100% of community garden participants indicated an increase in knowledge
- 100% of community garden participants indicated an increase in physical activity
- 100% of community garden participants indicated an increase in vegetable consumption

Overall Impacts

- Improved household food security
- Increased fruit and vegetable consumption
- Strengthen local food systems from the donated produce to food pantries
- Increased physical activity by engaging in digging, planting, weeding and harvesting throughout the season.
- Expanded horticulture knowledge and skills through trainings

Future Implications

- Continuation of this program will lead to
 - Greater community connectedness
 - Increased volunteer capacity
 - Improved environmental stewardship by education of soil improvement, biodiversity and supporting pollinators.
 - Long term sustainability of gardens with careful selection of plant varieties, technical expertise, ongoing education and learning about horticulture resources.