

Community Garden Helps Carbondale Residents Put Down Roots

By Laura Cardon

A community garden is more than just a place to grow your own vegetables. While the sustainable food movement has been in full swing for several years, Carbondale residents Elizabeth Cammack and Tami Stroud saw the opportunity for something bigger.

“I wanted to bring our community together around healthy growing of foods, but I also really wanted another way to bridge the cultural gap,” Cammack explained of Carbondale, where a third of the population is of Latino descent. “I thought if we could bring the two cultures together in a community garden, it would be one more way that we could start reaching across the gap.”

Cammack and Stroud spent four years spearheading the effort to bring Carbondale a better community garden. The current garden was serving only a small portion of the population, and a lengthy waiting list indicated a larger fan base beyond just Cammack and Stroud.

“Carbondale is a very environmentally-minded, organic, green-conscious community. There was a big demand with a lot of our residents living in apartments, condos, and townhomes without backyards or space for a garden,” Recreation Director Jeff Jackel said.

There was demand. And then there were two persistent women.

“Elizabeth Cammack and Tami Stroud really championed the garden,” Jackel said. “They pushed it for three years before even applying for GOCO funding.”

The project had a big budget for a small mountain town to absorb. Fundraising was essential, but applying for a Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) grant would be out of the question until a location was determined for the garden.

After considering a site along the Roaring Fork River, it was ultimately decided the community garden would find a home on the land where Carbondale Elementary School once existed. The school had closed several years prior, and its prime location in the heart of downtown Carbondale made it the perfect spot. Almost.

“There was no infrastructure or water at that location,” Jackel said. “We didn’t want to use potable water. We wanted to use ditch water. It would be a significant cost for about 1,000 linear feet of irrigation piping to bring ditch water to the site.”

The town had already set aside \$2,000 for the project, but with the budget topping out at \$60,000, Cammack and Stroud would have to look elsewhere for funding.

With \$2,000 in hand, Cammack and Stroud starting writing grants. First, to Aspen Ski Company Environmental, which ultimately awarded them \$8,000. Then, to gardening equipment company Fiskers, which resulted in another \$3,500.



“One of us would write the grant, and then give it to Jeff to work his magic on it,” Cammack recounted.

Even with local donations, the project was still \$45,000 short of its goal. Enter GOCO. The Colorado Lottery-funded organization’s mini grant program is specifically tailored to smaller projects, and Carbondale’s Community Partnership Garden emerged as the top ranked project in June 2012. Carbondale was awarded all \$45,000 it needed to reach its goal.

“We filled up as soon as we could break ground,” Cammack remembered.

The garden was named to reflect the community spirit that brought it to fruition, something Cammack describes as a trademark of Carbondale. Local landscape architects donated over \$4,000 worth of their time, while the town maintenance crew spent plenty of extra hours to help bring the garden together.

Today, the garden boasts 60 plots from 30 to 100 square feet in size, purposefully designed to be welcoming to all residents of Carbondale. The signage is bilingual, there are raised beds that are ADA-accessible, and educational programming and mentorships welcome newbie gardeners.

“We offer a support system,” Cammack explained. “If it’s your first time gardening, there are experienced gardeners who make themselves available to answer questions and talk with people.”

The first year that the garden was open, the Family Resource Center of the Roaring Fork School District hosted classes for first-time gardeners and sponsored several families by paying their plot fees. The Mount Sopris Historical Society also presented information about heirloom vegetables and took out their own plot to showcase the town’s agricultural and pioneer heritage.

But Cammack and Stroud didn’t stop there. They’re on a mission to bring in the entire Carbondale community with more beginner-friendly programming, even for those who don’t have a plot.

The social aspect of gardening is where Cammack sees real potential. While healthier diets and lower grocery bills are certainly benefits of a community garden, she has watched first-hand the relationships that grow alongside the produce.

“When you show up to take care of your plot and someone else is in the garden, you just start talking. First, you ask how their carrots are doing or what you should do with your spinach that’s turning yellow. But then it goes on to what’s happening in town, and they create these friendships that continue outside the garden,” Cammack said.

The Carbondale Community Partnership Garden, which has since be renamed Demeter’s Garden by town residents, could still be in the fundraising stage had it not been for the GOCO grant. GOCO funding helped fast track the garden’s progress, and GOCO has awarded funding to community gardens in Evergreen, Littleton, Denver, and at school play yards across the state.

“Community gardens are important to GOCO because they provide Coloradoans with educational opportunities that can instill a greater appreciation and understanding of the outdoors,” GOCO Local Government Program Manager Jake Houston explained.

“I love GOCO,” Cammack said. “It would have taken us a lot longer to raise that money without GOCO. We had to go through the town to get the GOCO grant, but really it was just a group of citizens that went to the town and said, ‘We want to do this,’ and it gave us a chance to actually accomplish something. GOCO is an amazing program that our state offers. The projects they fund add such vitality to our communities.”

Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) invests a portion of Colorado Lottery proceeds to help preserve and enhance the state’s parks, trails, wildlife, rivers and open spaces. GOCO’s independent board awards competitive grants to local governments and land trusts, and makes investments through Colorado Parks

and Wildlife. Created when voters approved a Constitutional Amendment in 1992, GOCO has since funded more than 4,500 projects in urban and rural areas in all 64 counties without any tax dollar support. Visit goco.org for more information.

The GOCO mini grant program awards up to \$45,000 in funding for projects with a total budget of \$60,000 or less. To find out more about mini grants, visit goco.org/mini.