

**Story Title:** Gardening for Dollars

**Location:** Northwest Michigan

**Focus:** Entrepreneurial Gardening



**Strategy:** In the Spring of 2010, MDCH WISEWOMAN Program staff secured funds to start an Entrepreneurial Gardening Program in Northern Michigan. The Health Department of Northwest Michigan had three of its four counties chosen to participate. MSU Extension was integral to the program's success. WISEWOMAN Lifestyle Counselors furiously made phone calls to notify WISEWOMAN clients of this opportunity and were able to refer all interested women directly to the MSUE staff in their county. The MSUE staff took it from there! The SNAP Ed Educator in each county partnered with the county's Master Gardener to create a series of classes that focused on nutrition, learning to garden, marketing skills, and bringing produce to the area's farmers markets. The classes were interesting, fun, and extremely informational. In some counties, the women were taken to stores individually to purchase gardening tools to help make their project a success; in others the women went as a group, but either way, the friendships that formed throughout this program between the participants as well as between MSUE staff and the women was life changing for all involved. All participants diligently worked through the summer learning and perfecting their gardens, and at the end of the season, WISEWOMAN Gardening Program participants, MSUE staff and Health Department staff from Northern Michigan all gathered together for a Composting class. The class was held in a spacious room in a local church in Bellaire, and the class was taught by a local Master Gardener. Everyone was asked to bring a dish to pass, and it was encouraged that all dishes be made from food grown in their gardens. High school students volunteered to pass information out and help serve food. The turnout was great! Erika Van Dam, the WISEWOMAN Coordinator from the Health Department of Northwest Michigan, led a discussion to start the day and went around the room asking women to introduce themselves and share something about their experience in the program. What a moving discussion!

**Outcomes:** A total of 11 WISEWOMAN clients shared the following stories:

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- "I planted an herb garden at my home, and through the classes in this program, I've learned how to season my food with my herbs instead of salt."
- "This program has awakened a new enjoyment in my life. It's one of the most exciting things of the summer. I feel confident in my

gardening skills, and my husband is a great support, too. He thinks it's so exciting!"

- "I've really used the nutrition classes. I share the information with my mom, and we're both getting away from using salt. We both use the seasonings from my garden instead, now."
- "I used this program to plant 72 tomato plants on my property! I've had to use the food pantry plenty of times in my life, so I'm going to donate these tomatoes to the food pantry. This is one way I can give back."
- "I'm new to the area, and I haven't been able to find a job. I love this program! I planted leeks, tomatoes, brussels sprouts, herbs.... It gives me an opportunity to get outside. I have met so many wonderful friends through this experience. I'm really happy. My husband is really supportive, too. It makes him happy that I'm happy."
- "I have really enjoyed the nutrition classes. I've learned how to make my produce drive my meal planning—not meat. Learning to cook with a variety of foods makes my diet more sustainable."
- "This has been a wonderful experience to bond with other women! I've also received help from my brother—he loves to make salsa, so that drove what I planted in my garden. We're spending more time together in the garden and in the kitchen!"
- "I used to garden years ago, but now it's all a mess. With this program, I created a new, small garden, and with the support from these women, it's re-awakened my love for gardening. This summer, I prepped my old garden to plant for next year!"
- "This is an entirely new experience for me. I didn't have any space at my house, so I created a small garden in my friend's backyard. She loves it, too! The nutrition classes are great nudges to eat right. I'm meeting new people, and I get exercise while I'm working outside!"
- From an MSUE SNAP Ed Educator, "We have all bonded through this program. I was able to learn so much more about gardening from the Master Gardener, and she was able to learn about nutrition from me. All of us had so much fun together. When we went shopping, it was like kids in a candy store! Everyone, including MSUE, has been so grateful to have been a part of this program."

This program did more than teach nutrition and the skill of gardening. It formed friendships, encouraged women to be outside exercising, gave participants an opportunity to share this information with their families, and overall increased mental and social health, in addition to physical health. All of the women wanted to continue the program next year, and even

those who won't be eligible for the WISEWOMAN program anymore wanted to serve as mentors to other women new to the experience.

Submitted by:

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