

11-1-2022

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Vidhya Jagannathan

North Cobb Regional Library, vidhya.jagannathan@cobbcounty.org

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Recommended Citation

Jagannathan, V. (2022). Cobb County Public Library Garden. *Georgia Library Quarterly*, 59(4). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/glq/vol59/iss4/9>

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FEATURED ARTICLE

Cobb County Public Library Garden

By Vidhya Jagannathan

A community garden is a great way of expanding the library's service beyond its four walls and promoting patron collaboration. The library's garden was imagined with the purpose of teaching and involving families in growing food and experiencing the immense satisfaction derived from harvesting and donating home-grown produce. Library gardens are a natural setting for promoting nutritional literacy and hands-on environmental learning. The North Cobb Regional Library Garden reflects Cobb County Public Library's mission of being a vital resource center and providing services to enrich people's lives.

A sensory garden that encourages patrons to see, smell, touch, hear, and taste promotes cognitive learning, improves gross motor skills, and nurtures the mind. The North Cobb Regional Library hosts a weekly meetup for neurodivergent adults every Thursday morning, and it was with this group in mind that Makerspace Coordinator Vidhya Jagannathan created two ADA-compliant wheelchair-accessible garden beds with the help of an Eagle Scout from Troop 75. Along with the two ADA-compliant beds, the garden also has six regular raised beds that Cobb County PARKS generously constructed for the garden. Funding for garden supplies and infrastructure has been made possible by a grant from the Food Well Alliance that

Jagannathan applied for with support from the Cobb Library Foundation and Branch Manager Nichole Knox.

Cobb County Master Gardener Jeanne Young provided immense help, support, and advice for the garden. Young generously donated her time, expertise, and plants to the North Cobb Regional Library Garden! In addition to the Boy Scouts, Master Gardeners, and PARKS, the Cobb





Library Foundation has been extremely supportive in assistance with acquiring needed supplies. Several workdays were conducted in spring 2022, with the help of volunteers from Emory University and Kennesaw State University, as well as family members and library staff. The raised beds were filled with compost and made ready for planting. The sensory beds were planted first by participants of the Adults with Special Needs Meetup Group. Robin Boyer, one of the caregivers, spearheaded the effort and acquired herbs like basil, mint, and oregano; textural plants like ferns and cacti; colorful Celosia; and vegetables like tomatoes and peppers. The planting activity was immensely enjoyed by members of the meetup group. They have been enjoying the garden weekly during their visits and have since installed a bird house and colorful painted rocks. A few weeks ago, meetup members enjoyed harvesting close to six pounds of jalapeños.

For the six other regular raised beds, Jagannathan wanted to involve patrons of the Cobb County community, so she formed a family garden club. This intergenerational club met Monday evenings from 5:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. throughout the summer. After deciding as a group, two beds were designated for a salsa garden and planted with tomatoes (Roma and cherry) and jalapeños. The idea was to grow the vegetables and make fresh salsa from scratch to have a fiesta party! In addition, onions, potatoes, sunflowers, blueberries, and radishes were also planted.

A whole row of pollinating flowers was planted and included a mix of annuals like zinnias, bachelor buttons, campanula, and African daisies and perennials like dahlias, alliums, and asters. The flowering row looked spectacular in the summer and drew in so many admiring visitors who have expressed their admiration. The pollinators that visited the flowers have kept most insect pests at bay and contributed

to sizable harvests. During the club meeting, patrons planted, watered, and weeded. Watering was usually a relay race activity! Jagannathan also had several STEM lessons woven into the events. Children tested the soil's pH levels using a cabbage juice indicator, learned about seed and plant parts, identified good and bad bugs, and learned why weeding is essential and how pollination works. The club attracted more than 85 participants overall.

Some challenges the program encountered were pests like deer and rabbits with whom the library has made its peace. Presently, leaf-footed bugs are wreaking havoc with the pumpkins, but the library does not spray any pesticide besides neem oil; the library is finding that the adult bugs scoff at organic controls! The intense heat wave during June in Georgia delayed the fruit setting in tomatoes. It also took the concerted efforts of several staff members to keep the garden watered during

the heatwave. Straw hats, long sleeved UV block shirts, and sunglasses quickly became a uniform for the garden waterers. A special mention of staff members Rita Spisak and Marie Lee who worked hard to water, weed, and aid Jagannathan in all her gardening efforts.

September saw the tomato and jalapeño bushes loaded with produce, and it was time for the promised salsa party. The creative staff at North Cobb Regional Library made piñatas shaped like tomatoes, a cactus ring toss game out of cardboard, and a pin the tail on the burro game. The library staff advertised the party on social media and invited all patrons, even if they did not participate during the summer. The library requested patrons to bring bowls and kitchen prep tools from home. The library provided recipes, other vegetables needed for the salsa, chips, juice, water, and spices. On the day of the party, 57 patrons showed up and harvested nearly 80 combined pounds of





tomatoes and jalapeños. The produce was gleefully hauled to the community room kitchen where it was thoroughly washed.

With lively music playing in the background, family groups worked together and made salsa from scratch using produce they had grown. It was farm to table at its best! After the salsas were heartily consumed, the participants played all the fiesta games and finished the party. They were effusive in their praise and wanted the library to repeat this event the following year!

The first year of the gardening program has been enriching and educational. Once the pumpkins are harvested, the garden will rest until next spring. The library plans to come back stronger and provide more educational and hands-on gardening programs next year. Jagannathan and the North Cobb Regional Library staff are immensely thankful to the Cobb Library Foundation and the Cobb County library administration for their

constant support and guidance in this endeavor.

Vidhya Jagannathan is a senior library assistant at the North Cobb Regional Library