



Grow Well Missouri

2013 - 2017 Evaluation Report

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Introduction

Grow Well Missouri is a University of Missouri program that partners with food pantries and other local organizations to establish food gardening programs that reach out to food pantry clients. The program provides technical assistance and supplies to enable groups to offer a selection of seeds, vegetable transplants, educational materials, and one-on-one advice to help those who use food pantries reap the many benefits of gardening. In 2017, the fifth year of Grow Well Missouri, the program included 23 community partners in 21 Missouri counties.

To have a better understanding of the impact of Grow Well Missouri, surveys are conducted with a sample of program participants in September and October each year. These surveys gather a variety of information about participants and their experiences in the garden. They help program staff gauge the effectiveness of the program and make improvements from year to year.

The following report includes results from the 2017 growing season along with a five year summary spanning 2013-2017. In 2017, a total of 238 people completed the survey from the communities of Bolivar, California, Columbia, Greenview, Holt's Summit, Joplin, Lancaster, Mexico, Moberly, Salem, Springfield, St. Elizabeth, St. James, Versailles, Waynesville, and Willard. A total of 678 people completed the survey from 2013-2017.

We are extremely grateful for the volunteers and staff from food pantries and other community-based groups who contribute hundreds of hours to pack seeds, set up displays, and offer gardening advice during the planting season. Their commitment to Grow Well Missouri ensures that when people in their communities go to the food pantry, they have access to gardening resources. We especially appreciate all of the food pantry clients who participate in the program. It is an honor to work with them, to hear their stories, and learn from their experiences.



[Grow Well Missouri](#) is a program of the University of Missouri Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security, affiliated with the Division of Applied Social Sciences in the College of Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources, in partnership with the [Health Communication Research Center](#) in the Missouri School of Journalism. Funding for the program is provided in part by the [Missouri Foundation for Health](#). For more information, see the [Grow Well Missouri website](#) or contact Bill McKelvey at McKelveyWA@missouri.edu or 573-882-4973.

Highlights from 2017

- **Grow Well Missouri materials are being utilized and those who use them are generally successful.** Most people (86%) who pick up materials plant a garden. Of those who plant, 88% report that their garden was a success.
- **Grow Well Missouri reaches both new and experienced gardeners.** Just under half (46%) of gardeners in 2017 had zero to five years of gardening experience.
- **Garden productivity varies from year to year based on many factors, but overall, productivity is high.** During the 2017 season, 89% rated their garden as somewhat to very productive.
- **Sharing produce is common for nearly all gardeners.** Just under 90% of participants share produce from their gardens. The vast majority share with friends, family, and neighbors, while others make donations at senior centers, nursing homes, churches, food pantries, and other agencies in their communities.
- **Some people are spending more time in their gardens.** Over a quarter of Grow Well gardeners in 2017 report spending more time in their gardens, compared to 2016.
- **Gardening skills are improving.** Just over half (56%) of gardeners reported that their skill improved by a little or a lot between 2016 and 2017.

In Their Own Words

An additional feature of the surveys in 2016 and 2017 included the collection of short testimonials from participants. This allowed us to gain insights about people's gardening experiences and the important role gardening plays in their lives. Below are a few excerpts from our conversations.

"I have to do gardening, it is in my spirit. I feel better about myself. It is my therapy."
(Greenview)

"It's relaxing. I grew up on a farm and it's getting back to nature for me. My biggest thing though is that it's very relaxing and calming." (Shelbina)

"Even if I can't find the time, I will always be planting and trying something." (Greenview)

"I grew up gardening. It's been a part of my life for as long as I can remember." (Moberly)

If I didn't have my garden... "I wouldn't have as many fresh vegetables. I hate to have to buy them, they're just so expensive. Also, you can't beat homegrown tomatoes."
(Moberly)

"I'm an outdoors person, and it gives me a reason to be outside. It's given me something to learn more about. I get to watch my family eat it, and save money at the same time. It's a win-win." (Boonville)

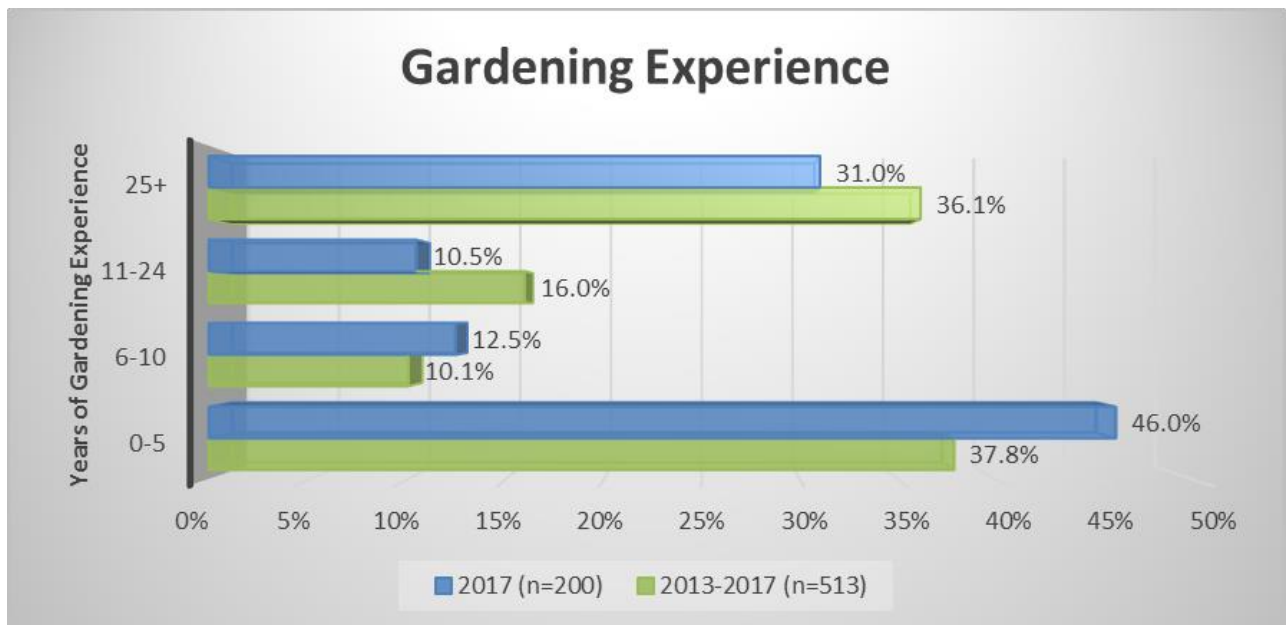
Results

Below is a summary of evaluation results from the 2017 growing season, including a summary from the five growing seasons spanning 2013-2017. Specifically, we include participant information related to their years of gardening experience, gardening success, garden productivity, the ways in which they use produce, changes in gardening activity, and changes in gardening skill.

Gardening Experience

It is important to note that many of the people who use food pantries have a great deal of gardening experience. For example, when asked how many years they have been gardening, people commonly respond, “I can’t remember not gardening.” or “I’ve gardened all my life.” In some cases, people indicate they are making a return to gardening, after having grown up gardening or gardened at some point in the past, as a result of Grow Well Missouri. As noted below for the 2013-2017 project period, just over half (52.1%) of participants indicate they have 11 or more years of gardening experience.

Yet, many people are new to gardening or are interested in giving it a try. In 2017, 46% of participants noted that they had zero to five years of experience, compared to 37.8% of participants for entire project period. We estimate that approximately 15% of all participants are first time gardeners.



Gardening Success

Over the course of the program, we are encouraged that the majority of people (85.2%) who pick up materials from Grow Well Missouri make good use of them by planting a garden. Further, of those who plant a garden, a majority (86.9%) report that their garden was a success. As shown in the graph below, the results from the 2017 survey that measure participation and success are consistent with the results from 2013-2017.



A host of factors contributed to people not planting a garden or experiencing a garden failure. In general, issues related to access to land, weather, being too busy, moving, and health played a determining role for many. However, many people who didn't plant a garden indicated that the seeds they picked up at the food pantry were shared with friends, family, or neighbors who did plant a garden.

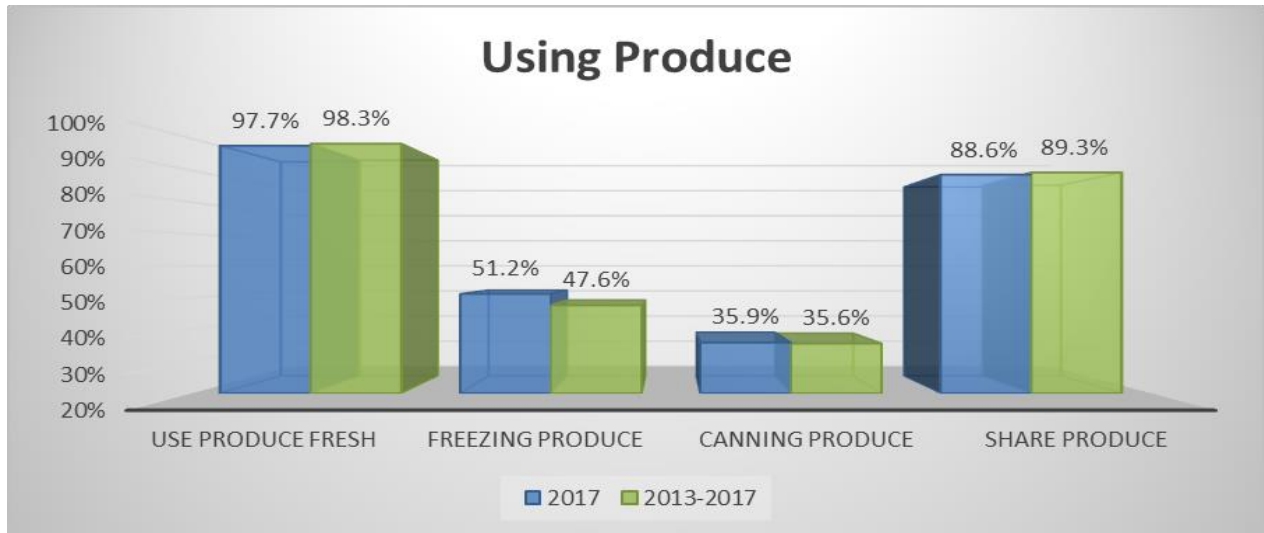
Garden Productivity

Self-assessments of garden productivity show that in most years, at least three-quarters of gardeners rate their garden as somewhat to very productive. One of the biggest factors affecting productivity is weather. In the case of 2015, where only 77% of gardens rated their gardens somewhat to very productive, most of our service area experienced drought in the early summer and too much rain in the fall. On average, between 2013 and 2017, 88.8% of gardeners had somewhat to very productive gardens.



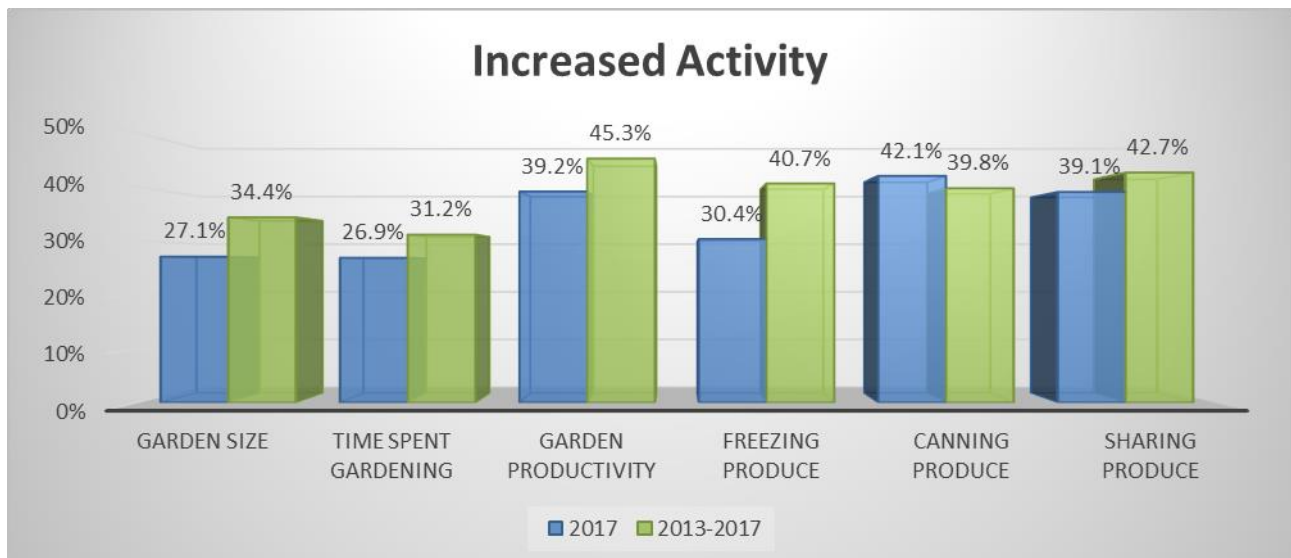
Using Produce

The ways that people use produce has remained relatively consistent over the span of the program. We continue to be impressed by the percentage of people (nearly 90%) who share produce from their gardens with others. This points to the benevolence of gardeners (despite their own low food security status), their interest and desire to share the fruits of their labor, and the way that home gardens impact the larger community. In addition, many preserve part of their harvest. Our surveys indicate that approximately 50% do some freezing and 36% do some canning.



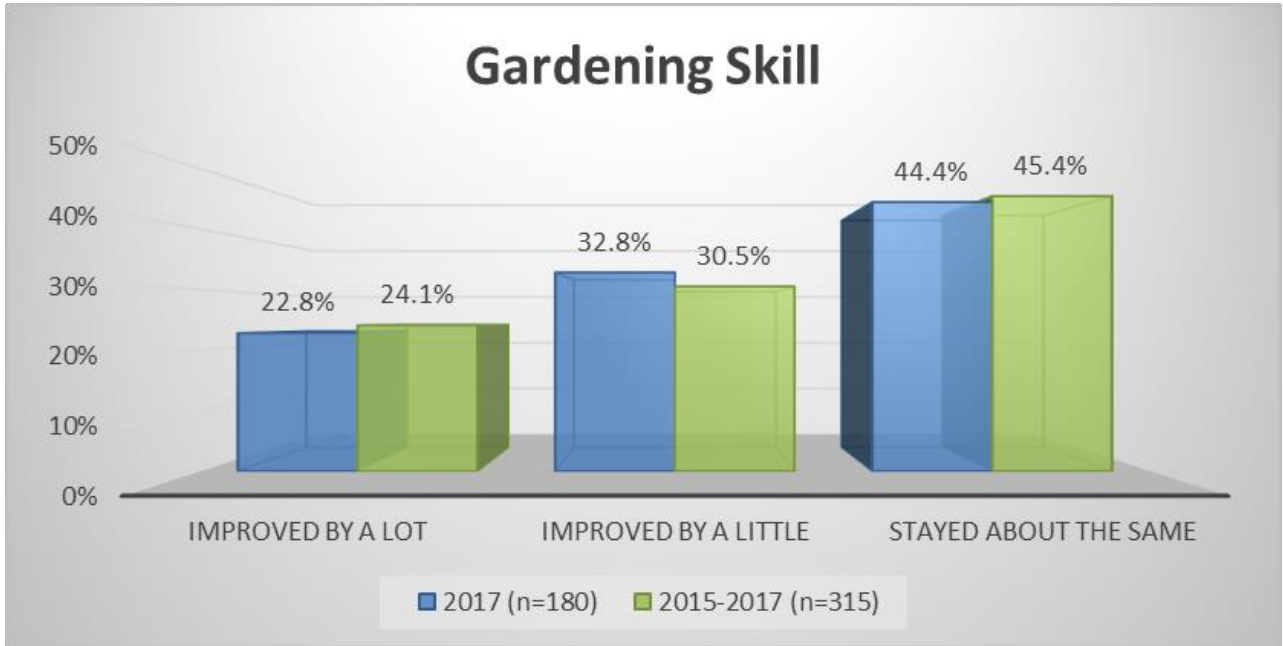
Changes in Gardening Activity

One goal of Grow Well Missouri is to help people to do more with their gardens. To gauge this, we ask people to consider a number of activities and tell us whether they are doing more, less, or the same amount of that activity, compared to the previous season. As noted in the chart below, over the course of the program, at least 30% of gardeners indicate they are doing more from one year to the next in all categories.



Changes in Gardening Skill

Another goal of Grow Well Missouri is to increase the gardening skill of gardeners. Through educational materials and one-on-one advice provided by volunteers, new gardeners are able to learn the basics and experienced gardeners can pick up new tips. The chart below indicates that just over half (55.6%) of gardeners in 2017 indicated that their skill improved over the previous year. The same holds true for all gardeners surveyed since we began asking the question in 2015.



Moving Forward

2018 marks the sixth season of Grow Well Missouri and the final year of grant funding for the program. However, there are reasons to believe the program will be sustained by local communities across the state.

First, the program works. Looking back over five years of evaluation data, we see that food pantry clients are making use of the program to grow and share fresh, garden-grown produce. They report learning new practices. Many are doing “more” of a handful of gardening activities, from spending time in the garden to freezing and canning produce.

Second, people like the program. In those communities where Grow Well Missouri is active, people begin to ask about it in January and February. It has become a fixture in many places and people look forward to the chance to talk with others about gardening and pick up gardening supplies. The program gives people hope, the chance to be a little more self-reliant, and the opportunity to continue an important activity in their lives.



Third, the program is manageable. More than twenty groups have been trained on how to plan and initiate Grow Well Missouri independently, without staff support. Groups are able to repackage seeds, set up volunteer schedules, acquire educational materials, and run the program during the prime planting season of March through May. Some groups have taken additional steps such as starting a community garden or hosting educational events to make fresh produce and gardening opportunities more available in their communities. One thing is clear - program management is greatly enhanced when community partners such as the University of Missouri Extension Master Gardeners, the local health department, high school agricultural education classes, or other groups are involved.

Fourth, the program is affordable. For an individual community, the cost to provide 15 different varieties of seeds for approximately 250 families costs between \$750 and \$1,000. This comes out to three to four dollars per household to set people up with most of the seeds and educational materials they will need to grow a garden.

Fifth, on-line resources will remain available. While grant funding no longer exists to provide seeds and seed packing supplies, all of the educational materials and program planning documents will remain available on the [Grow Well Missouri](#) webpage. In addition, for the foreseeable future, Project Coordinator Bill McKelvey will remain available to provide technical assistance to new and existing groups. Please feel free to contact Bill at McKelveyWA@missouri.edu or 573-882-4973. Follow the Interdisciplinary Center for Food Security at <http://foodsecurity.missouri.edu>.