



Polly Huggins and Mario de Haro plant a tree on Arbor Day as North Valley Charter School students look on at the Gooding Community Garden. (Photo courtesy Gooding SCD)

GOODING, WOOD RIVER DISTRICTS BUILD SUPPORT FOR CONSERVATION WITH COMMUNITY GARDENS

By Steve Stuebner

Over the last three years, the Gooding Soil Conservation District has revitalized the Gooding Community Garden with two grants from the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD). The garden provides fresh vegetables for local residents and food banks, conservation education for K-12 students and showcases conservation practices that could be implemented on local farms at a larger scale.

With funds from the second grant, the Wood River Soil and Water Conservation District created the

Neighborhood Community Garden from scratch at a pocket park in Shoshone.

In the last year, the Gooding District delivered 7,200 pounds of fresh vegetables to soup kitchens, senior centers, Helping Hands and Hearts, Food Banks in the Gooding, Wendell and Hagerman Valley areas, officials said.

"In the 2020 season, we distributed 6,500 pounds of vegetables to the same institutions served in 2019, increasing the number of people reached," said Barbara Messick, administrative assistant for the

Gooding and Wood River Districts. "Conservation practices showcased cover crops, drought-tolerant grasses, pollinator habitat, fruit trees, and composting. Students from elementary and high schools attended educational tours, plantings, and community projects for their state Envirothon contest."

Eric Moore, now retired from NRCS in Gooding County, started the Gooding Community Garden in 2016 with strong community and business support.

The first NACD grant, for \$42,000, revitalized Gooding Community

Garden activities with paid part-time staff and broad community involvement. The second \$50,000 grant not only launched the Neighborhood Community Garden in Shoshone but also added more components and variety to the Gooding Community Garden, Messick said.

"We provide space for private plots for local residents to grow food. It's been a really big deal for our communities, great for youth education, and it's just been amazing to see our communities support the projects in every way they can," she said.

"We've got a great team working on the community garden projects," added Kay Hults, a Gooding farmer and Chair of the Gooding SCD. "The school kids really get involved. We all pitch in."

Mario de Haro, Extension Educator for the University of Idaho said, "We love the great relationship we have with the Gooding and Wood River Districts. We teamed up to write and obtain those two grants and to bring education and community service to our communities, always working as a team."

"The results we have with the community gardens in Gooding and



Drip irrigation demonstration plot at the Gooding Community Garden. (Courtesy Gooding SCD)

Shoshone and the support of citizens, government, NGOs, and companies are humbling and very much appreciated," de Haro said.

In both grant applications to NACD, the Gooding and Wood River Districts had a clear two-pronged goal and strategy for the community garden projects.

"The Gooding Community Garden project will bring together community education about agricultural and urban conservation practices and provide community support for those in need who experience food insecurity," Messick wrote in the grant



4-H students harvest vegetables for local food banks. (Courtesy Gooding SCD)

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AmeriCorps workers create raised garden beds at the Neighborhood Community Garden in Shoshone.

provide community support for those in need who experience food insecurity,” Messick wrote in the grant application.

“Education through demonstration and involvement projects at the garden will be matched with community service and support. Despite agriculture being the main activity in the county, two situations inherent to the objective of this grant occur in the county. First, conservation practices adoption in general, and urban conservation practices in particular, are lagging.

“There are some noticeable exceptions on projects led by the Gooding SCD, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, University of Idaho Extension, City of Gooding and other institutions or private organizations,” she said, “but the widespread adoption of many conservation practices are behind of what it could be.

“Secondly, our communities have in common a high percentage of low-income families, and all schools in Gooding and Lincoln counties qualify for supplemental lunch programs.

Also, a high percentage of individuals struggle to access fresh, healthy food. Food insecurity, lack of knowledge on how to prepare healthy foods, lack of access to affordable fresh vegetables, low financial literacy, and lack of local resources to educate citizens on urban conservation practices are at the forefront of this project proposal to serve the communities in both counties,” she wrote.

The success of the Gooding Community Garden project provided inspiration for the Neighborhood Community Garden project in Shoshone, Messick said. Both districts often work together on projects.

“Both districts work on urban-rural conservation activities such as annual tree sales, Earth Day, Arbor Day events, the the “Trees Against the Wind” Initiative,” she said.

Local organizations that care for the Gooding Community Garden and grow produce include the Gooding Master Gardeners, Gooding Gardening Club, Gooding, Bliss and Hagerman FFA



Fresh produce ready for transport to food banks. (courtesy Gooding SCD)

Chapters, elementary and high school students, the School for the Deaf and Blind, and local churches. University of Idaho Extension Educator Mario de Haro also contributes to the Gooding Community Garden by growing cover crops and showcasing other conservation practices.



Students from Lincoln County paint pumpkins after harvesting them from the field. (courtesy Wood River SWCD)

Organizations supporting the Neighborhood Community Garden in Shoshone include:

- For the love of Growing Club
- Wood River SWCD – Board Members and Barbara Messick
- City of Shoshone – Mayor Dan Pierson and Aaron Aguilar
- Lincoln County Commissioners
- Glendale Construction – Amber McMurdo
- Shoshone Chamber of Commerce – Payson Reese
- University of Idaho – Carmen Wilmore
- Rural Fire Department – Chief Casey Kelley
- FFA Group – Brandie Lewis
- Shoshone High School
- Karma Fitzgerald
- Sweets Septic

“The Neighborhood Community Garden project has introduced urban agriculture to thousands of rural youth and community members by allowing them to establish and raise vegetable gardening plots,” Messick

said.

“It teaches them innovative technologies and techniques such as high tunnels, raised mulch beds, drip irrigation, and other methods to increase vegetable production. The project also directly aids a significant portion of our most vulnerable and in-need population by providing them with fresh vegetables and education on nutrition, family finances, and other appropriate training.”

The Neighborhood Community Garden in Shoshone is located one-quarter mile east of town on U.S. 93 by the Little Wood River. The pocket park is slightly less than an acre in size. The Gooding Community Garden is located behind the USDA NRCS Service Center in Gooding. Both gardens have a dependable water supply.

“Our first objective for the Community Garden/Pollinator Pocket Park is to purchase and install a drip-irrigation system to ensure water savings and reduce weed pressure,” Messick said. “The water system also is key for planting drought-resistant grasses, trees, shrubs, flowers for pollinator habitat and vegetable plants for a

community garden with raised beds.

“We have demonstrated these conservation practices and technologies to community members, gardeners and farmers throughout Lincoln County. We will plant seeds for pollinator habitat such as bees and Monarch butterflies to become a Bee and Monarch City USA.”

New in 2022 - Adding Greenhouse component

A greenhouse was added to the Gooding Community Garden in 2022 to provide more opportunities outside of the normal outdoor growing season, Messick said. “This will teach students many life lessons on weather, horticulture, fertilizers and climate conditions.

“We then plan to grow our own seeds for vegetables and flowers for pollinator habitat such as bees and Monarch Butterflies. This will allow us to reduce operating costs. Tree seedlings will be raised in the high tunnel and then sold to the Wood River SWCD for their annual Tree Sale to increase project sustainability.

“It is our goal to continue educating and informing Gooding and Lincoln County members of different conservation practices via our community gardens.”

Education outreach about Ag conservation best practices

The community gardens feature different plots showcasing conservation practices including: cover crops (summer and winter demonstrations), pollinator habitat using adapted species, tree planting and maintenance education, composting and vermicomposting demonstrations and classes, low-water demand and xeriscaping demo plot, storm water containment and drainage demo plot, urban water conservation practices and water source protection demos.

The project includes the delivery of



New High Tunnel/Greenhouse project at the Gooding Community Garden. (courtesy Gooding SCD)



Lincoln County kids dress up for a community garden event. (courtesy Wood River SWCD)

classes on each topic coordinated by the U of I Extension Service, NRCS and the Gooding SCD.

Other classes and programs include: How to grow vegetables, family financial management, family nutrition, composting, and more. Classes are taught, depending on the audience, at the University of Idaho Extension Gooding County Office, Gooding Library, USDA-NRCS Offices (contiguous to the community garden), and to community organizations that receive fresh produce.

Both grants provided funding for a part-time community garden coordinator position to maintain and expand the garden projects with volunteer and community help. That adds substance to the durability and sustainability of the garden projects, Messick said.

"Paramount to this built-in sustainability effort is the work of the Community Garden program coordinator and the support work by the main project partners, such as the Gooding SCD, Wood River SCD, U of I Extension, NRCS and the cities of Gooding and Shoshone," she said.

Gooding SCD No-Till Drill

In 2017-18, the two districts raised \$70,000 via donations from Glanbia, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, NRCS, Pheasants Forever, Miller-Coors, and Mid-Snake RC&D to acquire a 15-foot John Deere No-till Direct-Seed drill for local farmers to try and use.

Now in its 4th season of use, Messick says the tires are nearly worn out on the drill from so much use and highway transport. The drill has been used on 4,500 acres of land in the western side of the Magic Valley region, from Bruneau and Glenns Ferry to Twin Falls, Filer, Jerome, and Fairfield, she says.

"It's been all over," she says.

"We've got stickers all over our drill to show how many people have supported us," adds Hults.

Farmers have been using the no-till drill following the harvest of corn, alfalfa and grain cash crops to plant a variety of cover crops, and some farmers are grazing their cover crops with livestock to make income, stimulate plant growth and enrich the soil with cattle manure.

"It's nice to have the drill here locally to show people and talk about what

you can do with it," says Katie Dennis, Soil Conservationist for NRCS, based in Gooding. She also serves Camas and Lincoln counties. "It's like, let's go out and look at it, you're welcome to take it home and try it out."

The drill costs \$10 an acre plus \$60 a day to rent. Contact Messick for details at goodingSCD1@gmail.com

Dennis said she's noticed an increase in farm fields with cover crops.

"I know one farmer who is planting an alfalfa crop into stubble without having to till the soil," she says. "That's cool to see. A guy can save a lot on fuel by minimizing tillage."

She also has observed farmers planting some type of cover crop to prevent wind erosion. "I think the wind has been blowing more here in the last few years, and the producers are realizing they need to plant something in the fall to prevent their topsoil from blowing away."

Little Gooding City of Rocks Field trips for 5th graders

Each spring, the Gooding District takes 5th graders on a field trip to the Little City of Rocks, a geologic wonder located 12.5 miles north of Gooding on Idaho Highway 46. Little City of



The Districts' 15-foot No-Till Direct-Seed Drill has been popular for rentals by local farmers. (courtesy Gooding SCD)

Rocks features unique rock formations including hoodoos, mushroom caps, spires, towers and natural arches.

With the increased price of diesel fuel, the District fund-raises to cover the cost of bus transportation.

About 250 students normally attend the field trips, Messick says. They teach the 5th graders about a variety of natural resource topics at the Little City with six stations manned by experts from the Bureau of Land Management, Idaho Fish and Game, NRCS Twin Falls, North Side Canal Company, and Hagerman Fossil Beds National Monument.

"The kids really look forward to that field trip," she says. "They have fun being outside and learning about the



Wood River SWCD 12-foot Rangeland drill is available for rent as well.

geology and natural resources."

For more information about the Gooding and Wood River Districts, go to:
<https://goodingscd.weebly.com/>

or: <http://wrsxcd.weebly.com/>
 or call 208-944-3782.

Steve Stuebner writes for Conservation the Idaho Way on a regular basis.

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