

People's Garden: A healthier landscape

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President Abraham Lincoln founded the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 1862; and named it The People's Department. Since then, most Americans farmed and lived on farms. Although farmers and ranchers account for only a small percentage of population today, by some estimates, each farmer produces enough each year to feed 144 people. The *People's Garden* is designed to provide a sampling of USDA's efforts throughout the world as well as teach others how to nurture, maintain and protect a healthy landscape. If practiced, these garden concepts can be the general public's, government's, or business' contribution to providing healthy food, air, and water for people and communities.

In honor of *Earth Day*, Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack declared the entire grounds at the USDA Jamie L. Whitten Building as *The People's Garden* and unveiled plans to create a sustainable landscape on the grounds.

"USDA is an every day every way kind of department and the garden concept will help illustrate the many ways USDA works to provide a sustainable, safe and nutritious food supply as well as protect and preserve the landscape where that food is produced," said Vilsack. The garden will help explain to the public how small things they can do at home, at their business or on their farm or ranch, can promote sustainability, conserve the nation's natural resources, and make America a leader in combating climate change.

Deputy Secretary Kathleen Merrigan officially kicked off the Earth Day event at the Whitten Building with Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe Chairman Brings Plenty who performed a traditional song and planted seeds at a ceremonial Three Sisters Garden to celebrate American Indians' contribution to American agriculture. Merrigan led volunteers and USDA staffers in planting vegetables, herbs and flowers to complete the first phase of The People's Garden. Eventually, the garden will include organic raised vegetable beds, organic transition plots, an organic urban container garden, an organic kitchen pollinator garden, rain gardens and a bat house.

A Three Sisters Garden is a traditional garden consisting of corn, beans and squash that has been planted by American Indians for centuries. For centuries, Native American's have cultivated the soil and produced corn, beans and squash. Stories, ceremonies, songs and cultural traditions surround the annual planting, growing and harvest of gardens. Life lessons were learned throughout the gardening season. Stories of Three Sisters refer to a tradition of interplanting corn, beans and squash in the same mound. It is a sophisticated,

sustainable planting system that provided long term soil fertility and a healthy diet to generations of Native Americans.

Corn is the oldest sister. She stands tall in the center and provides strength and protection to her sisters below. She is not a lone plant, as she grows with a handful of corn sisters.

Beans are the second sister. She surrounds sister corn and reaches to the sun, climbing up the corn stalks. Her role is to keep the soil fertile by converting the sun's energy into nitrogen filled nodules that grow on its roots. As she grows, she shares and uses the stored nitrogen as food.

Squash is the third sister. Her vines trail over the mound, her leaves protect the sisters from weeds and shade the soil from the sun, and her beautiful blooms invite the bees and pollinate the Sisters while keeping the ground cool and moist. Her prickly stems help to deter pests and rodents from eating the nutritious produce.

USDA will plant several types of organic vegetables, culinary and medicinal herbs and pollinator friendly plants. Because the garden also is an educational demonstration, USDA will plant some unique types of fibers, such as the flax plant used to make linen, and grains, such as sorghum and millet, to raise public awareness regarding agriculture. In early spring, USDA has planted organic cool weather crops. Specifically, broccoli, kale, collards, seed radishes, cilantro, parsley, seed carrots, seed parsnips, hull peas, sugar snap peas, lettuces, beets, chard and spinach. Other organic crops are planned for late spring, late summer and mid-Fall.

The vegetable garden will be organic. USDA has begun the process to have the vegetable garden certified organic. The process typically takes 3 years to complete. During this time, USDA will share the steps of this process and actions being undertaken to help raise awareness about organic standards and develop educational tools to assist farmers in the certification process. The organic vegetable garden demonstrates what individuals can do to embrace organic practices and healthy eating regardless of where they live or work.

The People's Garden illustrates container gardens for small urban spaces, raised beds for community plots and larger field plantings for schools, institutions and farms. USDA is planning to replicate many of these garden features at USDA properties throughout the United States. The food from the vegetable garden will be donated to a local food bank. Other ideas for the People's Garden include a series of rain and pollinator gardens, bioswales (landscaping to remove silt and pollution from surface runoff water), native planting sites, green roofs, an education plaza, a memorial walk and a children's garden. Through these many garden concepts, "***The People's Garden***" demonstrates USDA's commitment to connecting with communities, promoting good health and conserving the Nation's environment.

The People's Garden is not confined to USDA headquarters in Washington, DC. Secretary Vilsack has challenged all USDA facilities-across the country and around the world-to create similar gardens and create healthier landscapes. The garden at the

Whitten Building was first dedicated on Feb. 12, 2009, to commemorate the 200th birthday of President Lincoln. USDA is planning to have the garden fully certified organic within three years. USDA's vegetable garden will provide a great variety and amount of organic produce, which will be donated to a local food bank.

To expand the People's Garden, USDA partnered with 75 representatives from other federal and state agencies, universities, non-governmental and non-profit organizations to redesign an innovative and sustainable landscape for USDA's headquarters. This landscape will demonstrate environmentally responsible practices and will educate and engage the public through accessible exhibits. Each office will determine what type of garden is most feasible depending on the site limitations, existing lease requirements as well as other local factors. USDA expects to have a wide range of gardens that could include anything from window boxes to rain gardens.

Potager is a French term for kitchen garden - a fusion of the gardener's desire for vegetables and a plot that is beautiful as well as useful and productive. The potager area mixes organic vegetables with native plants. Flowers are an important ingredient for beauty and pollination, and have been carefully selected to compliment the vegetables. Transitioning conventional gardening and farming practices to Certified Organic requires a series of crop rotations to improve existing soil's fertility and structure and to sequester previously applied chemicals. Three years of approved organic management must occur before harvested crops can be sold as or be labeled organic. USDA's planned crop rotations include organic field peas, plowed in and followed with buckwheat and then crimson clover.

Storm water from USDA parking lots, rooftops and walks will be redirected to bioswales that filter and infiltrate runoff. Bioswales improve soil and water quality, reduce silt and pollution and provide scenic and wildlife habitat. Consisting of a drainage course with gently sloped sides, the bioswale will be composted and planted with native vegetation to maximize water absorption and infiltration.

The rain garden will be a shallow depression to capture the remaining storm water runoff exiting the bioswale. Planted with native grasses and shrubs, the rain garden allows excess runoff to be absorbed into the ground. Native plants are recommended because they don't require fertilizer and are more tolerant of local climate, soil, water and drought conditions.

USDA employees will volunteer to work in the garden on their own time. The garden also will be maintained by USDA's local landscape contractor, Melwood Organization. Melwood is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit created in 1963 to serve people with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Melwood serves more than 2,100 people with developmental disabilities in the greater Washington, D.C. area. USDA will decide on the best location as they design the master plan for the *People's Garden*. The seedling comes from the Jackson magnolia tree that sits on the south portico of the White House. It's a special tree because it was planted by President Jackson in honor of his wife Rachel who passed right before they moved into the White House. The small *Magnolia grandiflora* tree was

repotted on Monday, February 23rd into a pot that will allow its root system room to grow and currently growing in greenhouse at the U.S. National Arboretum of USDA.