

COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Garden of Goodness

NorthShore's Be Well-Lake County program cultivates healthy eating habits for diabetes patients.

By Phil Rozen

If you are diabetic, then you know the critical importance of keeping your blood sugar levels under control. Eating lots of non-starchy vegetables is a vital component of the diabetic diet. Chock full of minerals, fiber, vitamins and phytochemicals like beta-carotene, vegetables have few calories and carbohydrates, and help improve diabetic symptoms.

So it only made sense for NorthShore University HealthSystem's Be Well-Lake County community outreach program to "grow" an initiative for patients with diabetes right in its own backyard in North Chicago. The two-pronged approach includes a weekly produce distribution to some 150 families, in partnership with the City Produce Project and the Northern Illinois Food Bank, to help meet the needs of a population challenged by a lack of fresh produce availability and access to high quality healthcare.

Additionally, the NorthShore program



launched the first-ever Be Well-Lake County Community Garden, funded by Monsanto and provided by the University of Illinois Extension and the Kineo Group, in partnership with the Lake County Health Department and Community Health Center.

"Dieticians often advise people with diabetes to have at least half of their plate covered with vegetables," said Cheryl Bell, Be Well-Lake County Coordinator. "If that's the message we are promoting to our patients, then creating this garden is the perfect way for us to reinforce that message."

In June, under the guidance of a team of Master Gardener volunteers, a group of Be Well-Lake County patients planted seedlings

of several varieties of peppers, along with lettuce, tomatoes, Swiss chard, wax beans, radishes, carrots and peas.

Their garden sprang from 25 earth boxes planted on an eighth of an acre patch of land. By early July, the volunteer gardeners began harvesting the first fruits of their labors, incorporating homegrown, fresh produce into their daily diets and sharing cooking tips. The garden yield was substantial through the entire growing season, with patients bringing home several pounds of fresh produce each week.

"This is my first and only garden," said Francine Jones, a Be Well participant who lost 50 pounds and now has her diabetes well under control. "Once we started, I found out it was really exciting. I love it, and we're going to do it again. We just planted radishes and snow peas. These are delicious if you slice them open and put them on the grill."

Eleven gardening volunteers with diabetes tended to the Be Well-Lake County Community Garden in 2010, taking "ownership" of two or three of the earth boxes. With an estimated 52,000 people with diabetes in Lake County, the goal is for participation to continue to grow in the years ahead.

"It is a significant challenge for our patients, who are working to maintain a nutritious diet and manage their diabetes," said Sara Smith, Be Well-Lake County Director. "The garden provides a critical source of local, fresh vegetables for patients and families. It also serves as a fun, hands-on learning experience that motivates participants to adopt healthier eating habits." 

Jonathan Hillenbrand/NorthShore University HealthSystem



Beverly Williams harvests tomatoes from the Be Well-Lake County Community Garden.