

HUG

Highlands Urban Garden

Progress Report - July 26, 2021

Summary

The Highlands Urban Garden (HUG) is a volunteer led collaborative project between the Livability22202 Open Space Working Group and the Arlington Friends of Urban Agriculture (FOUA). It was originally sponsored by the National Landing Business Improvement District (BID) and Arlington County Department of Parks & Recreation as a demonstration urban garden for the Plot Against Hunger. *It successfully shows that community-driven agriculture can address food insecurity by leveraging partnerships across public, private, civic and non-profit communities to transform marginalized space within our urban environment into vibrant, sustainable, food-producing ecosystems.*

History and Gardening Process

The HUG is located at Virginia Highlands Park (1600 S Hayes St., Arlington, VA 22202). Concept planning began back in June 2020. With approval from the County, work began on September 27, 2020, just in time for Urban Agriculture Month in October.

The volunteer team of Arlington neighbors first began by building a wood frame and spreading a deep wood chip base. 24 galvanized metal rings, spaced on both sides of the area set aside for future water tanks. The symmetrical design of the space is meant to be aesthetically pleasing, while echoing the feel of a “hug.” By November 2, experimental cover crops were planted for comparative trial. Each mix contained species of organic grasses, nitrogen fixing legumes, and deep rooting brassicas that protected the soil over winter and helped to support a community of healthy and beneficial soil microbes.

In spring, the volunteers used the verdant cover crop as “green mulch” by cutting it down and allowing organic matter to break down on the surface of the soil. This “no dig” technique helped improve soil biology and structure, retain water by preventing evaporation, and lock up carbon sequestered by the plants over winter.

Planting started in April, with many of the garden’s cool season vegetables, including lettuce, kale and bok choy, being grown by the students at Marymount University specifically for the HUG.

24

**Metal fire rings used
as raised beds**

45

**Volunteers from
neighboring civic
associations**

By early May, three 120 gallon water reservoir tanks with supporting bases were installed and adjustable timers were programmed to water the garden at specific times via low pressure drip irrigation. This affordable lightweight solution improved efficiency by emitting water directly at the base of the plants. This further reduced water loss to evaporation, and allowed volunteers peace of mind without having to be at the garden every day.

To maximize growing space in a small footprint, vertical support trellises were then added, including 16 foot galvanized steel panels that arched between rings for beans, tomatoes, and other climbing vegetables. A-frame structures were also built on site using trellis netting and locally harvested bamboo that was cut and donated by a local homeowner.

Providing for Pollinators

In addition to developing a systems that work for the community, a guiding principle in the design of the HUG is care for the needs of the plants and supporting insects. For this reason species were chosen that grow well together as “companions” in the same bed, and flowers were added to attract and support beneficial insects. Not only do the zinnias, calendula and nasturtium add a pop of vibrant color, but valuable habitat and food for over a dozen different critically important species.

Current Status

As of mid-July, a team of 45 neighborhood volunteers has dedicated over 420 service hours in the preparation, planting, tending, and harvesting of the crops, the equivalent of \$11,325 in volunteer hours.

In addition to being a demonstration garden, the HUG is a production garden. All produce grown here is donated as part of the Plot Against Hunger, which is supported by Arlington Friends of Urban Agriculture. Plot Against Hunger, previously managed by the Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC) is a network of community and home gardeners that donates fresh produce to a network of food pantries here in Arlington to help our neighbors in need.

To date the harvested produce includes: Mixed lettuces, chard, kale, herbs, bok choy, beans, cucumbers, peppers, tomatoes and cut flowers. Pole beans will be producing through August; Tomatoes/peppers through October; Squash will remain on trellises into October before transitioning back to leaf greens, onions and cover crops over winter.



Over 100 pounds of produce has been harvested at the HUG and donated to charitable food organizations—AFAC, Rock Spring Church, and Our Lady Queen of Peace Catholic Church—with the goal of reaching over 250 pounds by the end of the year.

Countless people have passed by the HUG and expressed appreciation for the beauty and efficacy of the project. In return, the project has shown how working in a small space with limited resources can create a highlight for community action.

Budget

As of mid-July, the HUG had received \$6,400 in donations from individual donors and the National Landing BID and had expended \$5,901.24. Donations in-kind included seedlings from Marymount University grown by students; mulch, water, and a storage box from Arlington County Department of Parks & Recreation; various tools, gloves, bamboo, and other materials from a variety of donors, and over 420 service hours by volunteers. The Crystal City/Pentagon City Rotary Club has promised a donation of \$2,500 which is expected this fall.

Next Steps

As a pilot site, the Highlands Urban Garden will serve as a model for future community-driven agriculture features throughout Arlington's urban neighborhoods. Plans are in the works to hold training sessions and create a curriculum for students on urban gardening. Since the outset, FOUA adopted this section of the park and the County granted permission until November 1, 2021. A request has been submitted to the County to continue the pilot project for another year. Consideration is being given for the future to expanding the HUG, either in Virginia Highlands Park or elsewhere in 22202. Volunteers can sign up to participate on the FOUA HUG website.

A small ceremony to thank donors and inaugurate the HUG is planned for July 26, 2021. Following the ceremony, volunteers will harvest whatever produce is available on that date and donate it to one of the charities. The press has been invited to spotlight the work of the volunteers and showcase what can be accomplished by building community, educating residents and students, and providing nutritious fresh produce to our local food pantries. We welcome more volunteers, particularly as we start planning for the winter crops and the process of wintering over for spring planting in 2022.

For more information about the HUG, including upcoming events and how you can volunteer, please visit us at:

<https://arlingtonurbanag.org/project-hug>

105

Pounds of fresh, organic produce donated to local food pantries

420

Hours logged by volunteers spent in service at the garden

\$11k

Estimated economic impact of the project as of July

We would like to especially thank our garden coordinator leads, our team of dedicated volunteers, and each of our valued partners.

THIS HUG IS FOR YOU!



LIVABILITY22202

