

Lessons Learned From The New White House Garden

Opportunities abound for teaching others about food production and healthy eating



SARA WYANT

WASHINGTON, D.C.

As an avid gardener, I was delighted to see the First Lady Michelle Obama break ground for a new “kitchen” garden on the White House grounds. Surrounded by some of the White House chefs and a group of fifth-graders from Bancroft Elementary School who will participate in the garden project, the First Lady broke turf on the 1,100 square foot plot on March 20th. The garden will be used to grow 55 varieties of vegetables, including red romaine, green oak leaf, butter head, red leaf and galactic lettuces, spinach, chard, collards and black kale, shallots, shell peas, sugar snap peas, broccoli, fennel, and rhubarb and onions.

Though the produce will primarily be used by White House chefs to provide fresh food for the First Family, the First Lady told reporters that the garden will have an important symbolic role. Via the garden project, she wants to encourage American families to think about healthy eating as a way to curb obesity and other diseases brought on by poor diet.

It also serves as a symbolic endorsement of the organic and local food movement, whose advocates from Kitchen Gardeners International collected over 100,000 signatures on a petition to encourage the White House garden. There has not been a vegetable garden on the White House grounds since a Victory garden was planted by First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt during the height of World War II.

However, the garden could be so much more than a symbolic effort if the public receives a first hand look at everything involved in starting a garden from planning to harvest. If that's the case, this plot on the South Lawn could be used to educate Americans about the joy, as well as the risks, involved with producing food of any type and of any scale.

In the process, maybe millions more Americans would understand what those of you in production agriculture witness on a daily basis. Granted, the level of risk associated with such a small scale project isn't the same as a commercial enterprise. But let's consider some of the ways the White House could expand the outreach and provide some “teachable” moments.

Information is power.

Some of the White House staff visited the Bancroft school's own garden a few weeks ago and pledged that they will learn from the kids and vice versa. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the children and the staff would keep a journal detailing exactly what type of work they did and how much time they spent?

They could answer questions like: How to select the best types of plants, how to read the label on the back of the seed packets so you know how and when to plant, how long does it take for the seeds to germinate and how do you know if your plants are sick or not? How much water do plants need?

Growing vegetables is labor of love for people like me, and often I consider the time to be therapeutic compared to the hours a day spent on my computer. But as anyone who really works in a garden knows, there is a lot of labor and often casual gardeners don't calculate the time involved. Digging up the dirt every spring and weeding throughout the summer are two of my least favorite chores, but it is an important part of the process.

The First Lady didn't seem too excited about the labor part of the equation either, according to a White House pool report on the garden groundbreaking. After about 10 minutes of scraping up the grass that currently covers the

plot, she was the first to audibly, ask: "Are we done yet?" Sure enough, it was picture time almost immediately after that.

Who can blame her? For millions of Americans, digging in the dirt and bending over for hours on end to weed or harvest isn't their “cup of tea.” Fortunately for these folks, they don't have to do the hard labor because they can “hire” farmers and farm workers to do it for them at a very reasonable cost and still reap the wonderful rewards of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Any discussion of gardening should include the tradeoffs between the investment of time spent doing what is often backbreaking work and the potential rewards. If it was as easy and simple as the First Lady made it look during her ten minutes with a rake, millions more would be growing their own food.

What does it cost?

The White House Press pool report on the ground-breaking event indicated the cost of the garden would be \$200. The White House groundskeeper has not yet returned my call on this subject, but I find that amount hard to believe. Time spent on drawing up the plans could have easily consumed that amount of money.

Seeds and plants are not cheap these days either, especially the organic varieties. While it's possible that you could go to a discount store and purchase all of the seeds and plants for a couple of hundred bucks, a true accounting needs to include all of the labor, water, nutrients and, of course, the land costs.

Granted, it's hard to put a cost on the White House real estate. Most urbanites don't have 16 acres in a park to call their own like the First Lady does. But any discussion of food needs to start with the land on which it is produced, whether it's a small section of the backyard or thousands of acres.

A true accounting of the cost of this new garden should estimate the value of the harvest and all of the costs incurred. It's called “net” – a calculation that many who don't raise crops for a living tend to forget. Truth be known, I could purchase most of the vegetables I raise every year at my local farmer's market for probably less than the money and time that I invest in my own garden. But for me, my summer wouldn't be quite the same without being able to walk into my backyard whenever I want an extra tomato or some fresh green beans.

What are the risks?

With a full time groundskeeper and staff on hand at the White House, there is little chance that this garden will fail. Yet, what if something does go wrong? Will we learn about it? Sharing some of the pitfalls – whether real or potential – would help people understand that planting something outdoors involves a lot of risk.

There could be too much rain at times or not enough, especially in those hot August days in Washington, DC. But weather is not the only threat. What do you do if rabbits like your lettuce? What if you get a nasty case of mildew on the lettuce crop? Discussing these topics in an open forum would be helpful to others who are learning about food production for the first time. It would also underscore the need for risk management, as well as research and extension services.

In the interest of full transparency, maybe the White House staff can focus a web cam on the planted area. Surely the team that developed a “Barney cam” in the previous Administration so that we could follow the White House dog, can figure out a “garden cam.” If that happens, those of you with web access and high-speed Internet can watch how this garden truly grows. Δ

Editor Sara Wyant publishes a weekly e-newsletter covering farm and rural policy called Agri-Pulse. For a four-week free trial, go to www.Agri-Pulse.com