Follow Up On Community Resilience Challenge!

by Laura Lengnick

Community Resilience Challenge Counts 980 Acts of Resilience in May

On a beautiful Saturday morning at the end of May, Susan McBride’s vision became a reality as a pollination garden began to take shape in the public right-of-way at the intersection of East Chestnut and Maxwell Street in the Five Points neighborhood of Asheville. Susan and her neighbors spent the day laying cardboard and paper bags over the existing lawn and applying compost to prepare beds planted with bee balm, daisies, asters, oregano, milkweed and other flowering plants that feed and nurture pollinators.

Gillian Scruggs, an Organic Growers School Coordinator and AmeriCorps Service Member, worked with Susan to design the garden layout, manage soil and drainage issues, and obtain city approvals. Gillian joined the pollinator garden team as part of her job to develop a new “Home Growing” program for the Organic Growers School.

“The aim of the new program is to get the public growing food for themselves and their neighbors,” Gillian said, “by sharing and learning from each other. The program is designed to build community by encouraging neighbors to rely on each other as a source of inspiration and education.” As Gillian began thinking about a first project for the new program to sponsor, it just made sense to work in her own neighborhood of Five Points.

Gillian had heard about the Community Resilience Challenge through her co-worker at the Organic Growers School. “I had already thought the Challenge was a great idea that would support goals of the Home Growing program really well,” said Gillian. “The pollinator garden seemed like a great example of an action that cultivates community resilience, so I registered the project at the Ashevillage Institute website.”

Planting a pollination garden in Five Points, installing permeable paving in West Asheville, hanging a clothes line in Kenilworth, starting a compost pile in Oteen, and sharing garden bounty with neighbors in Candler. These are just a few of the many actions counted during Asheville’s first ever Challenge, a project led by Ashevillage Institute, an Asheville-based organization offering classes and apprenticeships in regenerative, nature-based community systems and resilient living skills. Over the month of May, individuals and organizations in the Asheville region registered a total of 980 acts taken this spring to increase community resilience by growing food, conserving water, saving energy, reducing waste, and building community in our region.

The idea behind the Community Resilience Challenge is simple: we can support and inspire the transition to a more resilient community through a coordinated effort to document, share, and celebrate the actions taken by individuals and groups to cultivate resilience. Most of the actions registered during this year’s challenge were made by individuals and organizations located in Asheville, but nearby communities like Fletcher, Weaverville, Leicester, Candler, Barnardsville, and Hendersonville were also represented.

Why the focus on community resilience? Because 150 years of industrial development powered by fossil fuels has destabilized our climate and degraded the natural, human, and social assets and extracted the financial assets that are the foundation of local community health and well-being. These degraded assets leave us more vulnerable to the effects of climate change and other 21st century challenges on our food, water, energy, manufacturing, waste, and transportation systems. Citizens and community-based organizations can play an important role in efforts to protect, conserve, restore and manage these critical assets so important to our well-being, even as we press our leaders to support national and international action to slow and eventually reverse global warming.

Resilience is the goal because resilience thinking provides some unique strategies for sustaining community well-being under conditions of high uncertainty and dynamic change – exactly the kinds of conditions likely to become the defining characteristic of the 21st century. Resilient communities have the capacity to respond to disturbances and change in ways that avoid or reduce potential damages and take advantage of the opportunities created by change.

The pollination garden cultivates resilience by strengthening all the assets in the Five Points community portfolio – natural, human, social, financial and technological. Because the garden is composed of a variety of flowering plants designed to provide shelter and food to pollinators, it increases the biodiversity of the Five Points neighborhood. If the pollinator garden is successful, gardeners growing fruits and vegetables in Five Points and beyond will reap the benefits of increased populations of bees, wasps, butterflies, moths, beetles and hummingbirds.

Soil and water management plans for the garden will increase the capacity for water capture and storage on site which will reduce runoff during heavy rains – a major problem in the neighborhood that has grown worse because of recent development. Replacing the lawn with a perennial...
garden will reduce fossil fuel energy use, because a diverse garden of flowering plants that has the capacity to produce its own nutrients, collect and store its own rainwater, and suppress pests has replaced a lawn that required regular mowing, irrigation, and applications of fertilizers and pesticides.

Susan and Gillian’s work with their neighbors, their neighborhood association, and city officials helped to raise awareness and knowledge of the catastrophic loss of pollinators in this country and why pollinators are so important to our well-being. The pollination garden project offered Susan and Gillian’s neighbors some practical, hands-on experience in how to transform a lawn into a thriving garden. And the project gives us all one example of how we can support and protect healthy populations of pollinators in our own neighborhoods. Perhaps most important, working in community to create the pollination garden on public land increased the capacity of the community to more effectively respond to threats and take advantage of opportunities created by change.

Projects like the pollination garden, along with the many other actions taken by individuals and groups to grow food, save water, conserve energy, reduce waste and build community generate the capacity for community-based response, recovery and transformation that we need to sustain our well-being through the inevitable challenges ahead. You can learn more about how Challenge participants cultivated resilience in their communities and what you can do to cultivate resilience throughout the year at the Community Resilience Challenge page on the Ashevillage Institute website.

LAURA LENGNICK has explored community sustainability through more than 30 years of work as a researcher, policy-maker, educator, and farmer. She owns Cultivating Resilience, LLC, a consulting firm based in Asheville offering ecosystem-based mitigation and adaptation planning services to non-profits and higher education, business, and government. Her award-winning book, Resilient Agriculture: Cultivating Food Systems for a Changing Climate (New Society Publishers 2015) explores climate change, resilience and the future of food through the adaptation stories of sustainable farmers and ranchers growing food all across the U.S. You can learn more about Laura and her work at www.cultivatingresilience.com.

Five Points neighbors making garden beds at corner of E. Chestnut and Maxwell. Photo: Gillian Scruggs