

Living Laboratories in Community Gardens

We love gardens in homes and public spaces -- they beautify our surroundings and put food on our tables. In an urban environment, gardens provide a sense of well-being and place, and offer us a chance to learn to live in harmony with nature. At the same time, given the scarcity of water in our region, gardening challenges us to develop projects that are environmentally friendly. These are great things!

Our proposal is to create a project inspired by the question: What if we also thought of gardens as meeting places where people from different walks of life could gather and learn from one another in creative ways? What if gardens:

- brought community and university members together through shared learning projects?
- were places that integrate urban agriculture and technology to promote food security, environmental stewardship, and digital literacy?
- could be connected through social networks to help generate and share local urban agriculture innovations?
- became long-term sources of community enrichment?

This is the vision of gardens that the San Diego Community Garden Network has been working to make a reality in San Diego County for more than four years. Through a new joint program with UCSD called Green STEAM Communities, the Garden Network will be working with the City of Chula Vista, Surfrider Ocean Friendly Gardens, and La Gracia y Paz Church to make this vision a reality in a community garden that was recently started in Chula Vista. Green STEAM Communities implements its programs by combining university service-learning with community-led projects.

Green STEAM Communities and partners will design a permanent living laboratory and integrate it into the garden by offering a class open to university students and community members. The class will be modeled on one taught at Kearny High School, for which Green STEAM won the San Diego Science Educators Association's 2013 award for excellence in science education. The class will integrate our current web sharing, digital sensor, and Google-based mapping tools into gardening activities. When completed, the living laboratory will join two others in Linda Vista. Please visit the following links to learn more about how this will work:

- www.greensteamcommunities.org/projects
- <http://www.sandiegocommunitygardennetwork.org/about>

We intend for the learning laboratory at the Chula Vista Community Garden to serve as a pilot for replicating the permanent integration of learning laboratories in community-based gardens throughout San Diego.

Budget

Grant funding will be used for instructor salaries, web infrastructure development, and materials for the learning laboratory, including gardening equipment, digital garden sensors, and computer micro-controllers that will be used to translate the measurements gathered by the sensors into information that can be presented on the Web.

Other funding and in-kind support has already been committed to help complete the garden elements.

Timeline

1. August through October 2013: curriculum development, living laboratory design for the site
2. November 2013 through January 2014: build the learning laboratory, complete selection of participants for the pilot 8 week class
3. February through April 2014: conduct class and complete post-evaluation

Proposal submitted by Judy Jacoby, Robert Lecusay, and Ivan Rosero of The San Diego Community Garden Network and Green STEAM Communities. Contact: SDCGNetwork@gmail.com.