

impact

University of Idaho Extension programs that are making a difference in Idaho.

Harvest Heroes military veterans grow skills, comradery and food in Nampa

AT A GLANCE

University of Idaho Extension connects Idaho veterans with opportunities to grow food for themselves, their communities, and explore entrepreneurial small farm and food enterprises.

The Situation

An estimated 115,437 veterans live in Idaho. The Idaho veteran population is an underserved community that often faces issues of food insecurity, joblessness and is not always connected with available resources. Many veterans also struggle with mental and physical challenges resulting from their military service. University of Idaho intern and Air Force veteran Connie May, working with Area UI Extension Educator Ariel Agenbroad, spearheaded interviews and listening sessions with Idaho veterans beginning in 2018, and identified significant interest in small scale agriculture and food production as an opportunity for community engagement, therapy for mental wounds obtained while in defense of their country, networking and comradery with other veterans.

Our Response

With support and seed funding secured by UI Extension Educator Iris Mayes, the Harvest Heroes Veteran Beginning Farming Education Program was developed and piloted in Nampa and Moscow in 2019, utilizing UI Extension Cultivating Success™ small farms and Idaho Victory Garden family gardening curriculum. The program was designed to engage and train military veterans and their families through a combination



Harvest Heroes participants prepare for spring planting in Nampa. Photo by Ariel Agenbroad.

of classroom time and hands-on training focused on the skills needed to grow food for themselves and their communities, or to establish small farm or food enterprises. Harvest Heroes training also includes skills that could apply to jobs in small scale agriculture, increased awareness of veterans' programs, introduction to a variety of veterans' service organizations and horticultural therapy.

Following the pilot year, Harvest Heroes received funding from U and I Gives, a USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program Grant, and the Idaho Veteran's Recognition Fund. These gifts and grants support program coordinator wages, teaching garden equipment and supplies, program marketing and outreach. This keeps the cost of participation

for veterans low. Scholarships are also available to cover the \$65 annual program fee.

Program Outcomes

Harvest Heroes pilot programs in Moscow and Nampa in 2019 enrolled over 20 veterans and their family members. Every branch of military service was represented.

In the Moscow pilot, participants grew fresh vegetables at the University of Idaho Soil Stewards Student Farm and on Hamilton Community Garden plots. Produce not utilized by participants was donated through Backyard Harvest, a nonprofit that works with food banks serving the Latah County community.

The Nampa Harvest Heroes participants manage the Liberty Veteran's Garden in partnership with the Boise Rescue Mission, an organization providing shelter, food, and assistance to veterans and others experiencing homelessness. Most of the vegetables, herbs and berries grown at the Liberty Garden are delivered to the adjacent Lighthouse men's shelter for resident and community meal programs and food boxes distributed to low-income households in the neighborhood.

Since February 2020, 24 veterans and family members have participated in the Nampa program. Classroom instruction in both 2020 and 2021 was delivered using Zoom, February through May, and covered crop planning, season extension, soils, pest management, food safety, harvesting and nutrition. Weekly hands-on garden instruction was conducted April through October, following established Covid-19 policies that met university and local health district requirements for social distancing, safety and sanitation. Several weekend workshops focused on seed starting, drip irrigation, seed-saving and food preservation were held throughout the season. Nampa Harvest Heroes have grown, harvested, packed and distributed over 3,302 pounds of fresh vegetables, berries and herbs over the 2020 and 2021 seasons, worth an estimated \$6,186.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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In 2021, produce was donated to the Caldwell WICAP Community Collaborative food pantry as well as the Lighthouse men's shelter.

Mid-season and end-of-season program evaluations indicate that participants have increased their knowledge and skills in 12 key topic areas related to garden planning, food production and sustainability. All participants rated the Harvest Heroes Program as "good" to "very good" in terms of providing opportunities to develop relationships with other veterans and to facilitate personal healing. One participant shared, "I really enjoyed the program. The instructors really did a lot of one-on-one work and adjusted according to each person's abilities and capabilities. I also enjoyed the opportunity to meet other veterans and even talk to a few on a regular basis." A participant from 2019 recently bought his own farm. Another participant from 2020 with his own small farm now serves as a mentor for other young veteran farmers.

In 2021, Harvest Heroes established a permanent pollinator garden area and participated in a regional citizen science pollinator assessment project. Participants also expressed interest in bringing their children to the garden, which led to the purchase of kid-sized tools and the beginning of a planned children's garden area at the Liberty Veteran's Garden. Several new wheelchair accessible garden bed designs were constructed in 2021 as well and will continue to be evaluated.

The Future

University of Idaho Extension is working to establish a future Harvest Heroes garden site in Boise. A new partnership with Global Gardens in Boise has offered incubator farm sites for program graduates to scale up crop production. Mentoring and better connectivity across the veteran farming community has been identified as a need, and may be addressed by supporting the formation of an Idaho Chapter of the National Farmer Veteran Coalition.