

COMMUNITY

# 'NUTRITIONALLY MEANINGFUL'

## Study aims to bust stereotypes about home gardens

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Backyard gardens aren't just a novelty, and they can have a meaningful impact on nutrition, according to a University of Wyoming research project involving local gardeners.

Garden Researchers of Wyoming, or GROW, is part of a five-year, \$5 million research project, called Food Dignity, about community food systems. UW assistant professor Christine Porter, who works in the Division of Kinesiology and Health, is spearheading the project in collaboration with a team from Cornell University. Porter and her research partners are following five community food groups developing local food systems, one of which is Feeding Laramie Valley. The garden research project was conducted through Feeding Laramie Valley and involved 33 local gardens totaling more than 9,000 square feet last summer. Gardeners weighed and identified their produce as they harvested.

Porter said home gardens can contribute meaningfully to food production, even in a place like Laramie, which has a short growing season. "The rhetoric out there is that (home gardens) are not important for food — they're just cute," she said. Those 33 gardens produced 4,519 pounds of produce, which was worth \$15,982 in farmers' market prices.

The gardens produced about \$1.71 worth of produce per square foot. On average, they produced almost nine months of vegetables for an adult eating the two or three cups a day recommended by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. "That's nutritionally meaningful," Porter said. Gardeners ate about half of what they harvested, stored 19 percent and shared 30 percent.

The top vegetable by weight was tomato, followed by squash and zucchini. Tomatoes were also the top produce by percentage of harvest value at 23 percent, followed by salad greens and kale.

Porter said the production of the backyard gardens was comparable to that of a commercial vegetable farm. On a larger scale, the Laramie gardens would produce about \$74,000 worth of produce per acre. "This is well in the range of a professional vegetable farm," she said.

Feeding Laramie Valley community organizer Gayle Woodsum said studies like this are necessary to bust myths about local food production, like ideas that home gardens are simply for fun and don't provide real value. "It's a study that's never been done," she said.

The data could also be used to influence funding for more local projects or impact policy, she said. "This very much is about food security and people having access to fresh, healthy food," she said.

Porter said that while the study didn't factor the costs of raising a garden, such as higher water bills, it also didn't factor harder-to-quantify benefits like the convenience of easy access to fresh vegetables. "I had lettuce out my back door," she said. "I saved myself time and money, and I didn't have to go anywhere."

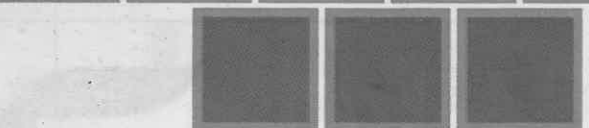
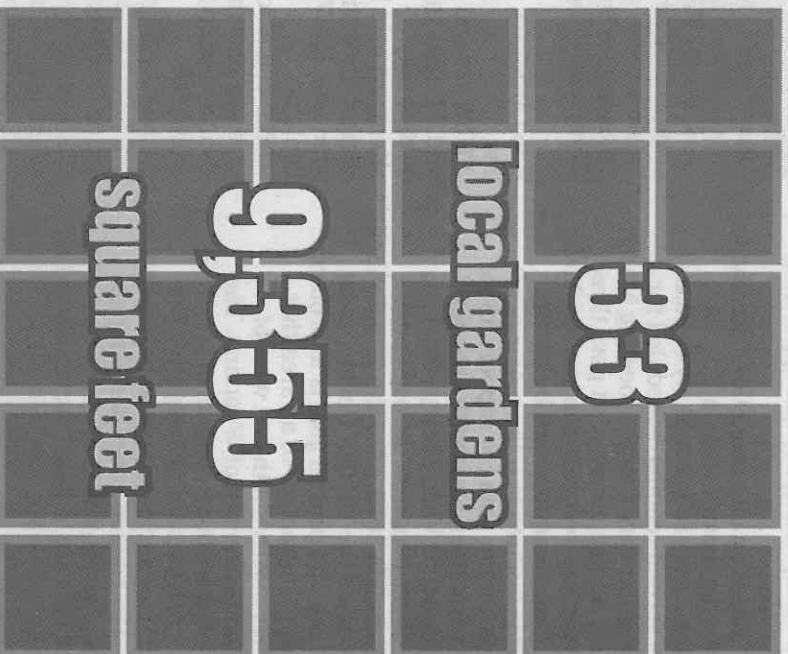
Future studies might look at harvest size and relationships to health impacts like blood pressure and stress, Woodsum said.

Other Feeding Laramie Valley initiatives include collecting and distributing donated produce to local nonprofit groups and supporting community production gardens.

Food Dignity, now in its third year, is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

### WHAT DID THE STUDY FIND?

Garden Researchers of Wyoming (GROW) Garden Measures 2013 data. The study is part of a research partnership between Feeding Laramie Valley and Food Dignity, a five-year research project at the University of Wyoming. Local gardeners participated in a garden measures project last summer, where they weighed stuff every time they harvested from their garden.



4,519 pounds of produce were harvested.

\$15,982 (in local farmers' market prices)

The local gardens produced about \$1.71 in produce per square foot

That means the produce harvested was worth

That means each garden on average could feed an adult two-three servings of vegetables for 272 DAYS.

51% of produce was eaten, 19% was stored and 30% was shared

