



Hoop Houses Connect Community

The goal of building six hoop houses in Lexington, Ky., before the World Equestrian Games has promoted sustainability and united the community.

December 2, 2009

Photo by Rachael Brugger

The Bluegrass Community and School Garden Network plans to build six hoop houses by the 2010 World Equestrian Games.

When it comes to living sustainably, it's all about connections—connections to the Earth and connections to the community. At least that's how Jim Embry sees it.

Embry is actively involved in the Bluegrass Community and School Garden Network (BGCSGN) in Lexington, Ky., as a way to promote the growth of a more sustainable city and grow more localized food systems. The network's initiative, Grow Lexington!, focuses on growing green spaces, food spaces and the local economy instead of big industries that contribute to global warming, but aims to involve the community in the process as well.

In November 2009, Embry supervised the construction of Lexington's first community hoop house. BGCSGN intends to construct at least six hoop houses before the city hosts the World Equestrian Games in the fall of 2010, with the help of a grant provided by a local donor.

Photo by Rachael Brugger

Members of a youth group help build compost bins that will be placed inside the hoop houses.

The Lexington hoop houses, from construction to operation, are meant to be a community endeavor.

"When you build something, not only are you building community, but you are building the community's capacity to build things," Embry says. "We need things like that to build that sense of community. The hoop house, in a sense, is the urban application of a barn raising."

People from all walks of life joined in the "hoop house raising," from a youth group to biomedical engineer university students to long-standing members of the community.

"We had people helping out who had never used a chainsaw," Embry says, but it gave him an opportunity to teach about citizenship and sustainability.

Modeled after Will Allen's Growing Power in Milwaukee, Wis., the hoop houses will include worm composting and aquaculture systems.

According to Mary Wilson, who led a youth group of 32 students from Hope First Church of God in Mt. Sterling, Ky., to help with the project, by learning about the purpose for the hoop houses they were about to build, Embry learned the importance of self-sufficiency and how composting reduces greenhouse gasses.

The hoop houses will also be used to grow seedlings that will be distributed to school and community gardens around Lexington. The food coming from the hoop houses and the gardens will be sent to the area's food banks and homeless shelters.

"The number of people we are feeding at the shelter has tripled because of the current economic situation," says Frank Brangers, a community volunteer who donated the supplies to build the first hoop house. "We've got to do what we can to offset the people who are marginalized. Lots of [the people we feed] work in the gardens, which gives them a sense of purpose."

The site of the first hoop house sits on the property of Fresh Approach, a facility that processes foods for local restaurants and employs developmentally challenged adults. Fresh Approach will tend to the hoop houses built on its property, says director Walt Barbour.

Eventually, BGCSGN wants to build a hoop house in every council district as part of urban garden resource centers, where people can have meetings, pick up mulch, compost and grow food year-round. Embry expects to begin construction



on the next hoop house in January 2010.