

# Tips for Starting a *Soul Patch* Garden in Your Community

This tip sheet is designed to help you start a community *Soul Patch* garden to provide fresh produce to your local food shelf. It outlines the steps Erik Warner took to start his garden in 2009, along with resources and tips he found useful. Erik has also offered to serve as a resource for anyone interested in developing a similar program in their own community. You can reach Erik via email at [mcsoulpatch@gmail.com](mailto:mcsoulpatch@gmail.com).

Keep in mind that this tip sheet is meant to be a starting point. Every community has unique needs, strengths, and challenges that can and should influence the way you put your own program together.

## **WHAT IS THE SOUL PATCH?**

The Soul Patch is a garden that provides fresh produce to the Morrison County Food Shelf. In 2009, its first year, the mostly-organic garden provided (incidentally) 2,009 pounds of fresh vegetables to food shelf patrons. This included fresh green beans, peas, zucchini, summer squash, tomatoes, bush beans, cabbage, Swiss chard, and Jalapeño peppers (which were surprisingly popular given the Midwestern palate of the region). Erik Warner conceived of and started the Soul Patch with the help of his family and community volunteers.

## **HOW DID THE SOUL PATCH COME ABOUT?**

Erik was born and raised in Morrison County, which has one of the highest poverty rates in Minnesota. He had seen food insecurity in his own community, and knew something needed to be done about it. Bethel Lutheran Church owned an empty plot of land that happened to be right next to the Morrison County Food Shelf. Erik drove by one day and thought to himself that it would be the perfect place for a garden that could provide vegetables to the food shelf. “I wish somebody would do that; that’d be really cool,” he’d think every time he drove by.

One day Erik realized if he wanted to see a garden in place, he should be the one to make it happen. Despite having no experience growing food, Erik was able to rally together enough knowledge and resources to produce a ton (2,009 pounds, to be exact) of vegetables in the garden’s first year, and it’s still producing food for the Morrison Country Food Shelf today.

# **BRINGING *THE SOUL PATCH* TO LIFE**

## **Securing the Land**

At first, Erik wasn't sure who owned the land, so he spoke to a representative at the food shelf to find out. They told him to talk to Bethel Lutheran Church, so Erik approached their pastor with the idea. The pastor loved the idea of using the space for a community garden and brought it to the church board for approval, which they granted.

## **Learning How to Grow Food**

Erik knew he could find people with experience growing food in his area at the local farmers market. He talked to some vendors and found they were happy to help once he described his project. One even helped him sketch out the initial plan for the garden. Other possible resources include: your local University of Minnesota Extension office and/or Horticulture Society or a Master Gardeners' Club.

## **Liability Insurance**

Liability was brought up as issue by the church board. After looking into it they decided the garden would be covered by the church's liability insurance. Other possible resources for information on liability insurance for community gardens: Homegrown Minneapolis or community or neighborhood organizations.

## **Materials and Water**

Erik spent about \$50 out-of-pocket in the garden's first year on renting an industrial-sized tiller and on seeds. Donations covered the rest of his material needs. For example, he talked to the clerk at the local machine shop and someone who worked there offered to plow the ground for free. A local greenhouse donated dozens of tomato and pepper plants, and pea and bean seeds.

There was already a water hookup at the food shelf, but they needed money to cover the additional water costs that would be incurred when the garden was up and running. Erik found a local group—the West Side Improvement Organization— who gave the Soul Patch a \$200 donation to pay the water bill.

## ERIK'S TIPS FOR A SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY-DRIVEN PROJECT

**Feel empowered to start a project on your own.** Erik had never grown food before and didn't have a toolkit to help him along the way. Instead, he relied on his own resourcefulness to identify barriers and seek solutions to overcome them. He knew that by working at a grassroots level, with the tools already available in his community, he could get the job done.

**Use the media and online channels and networks to get the word out about your project.**

Erik's wife put together a press release, which caught the attention of the local newspaper. It included a photo of the food shelf director harvesting the garden's first pepper. When people read about the garden in the paper, they called and offered to donate time and plants. The Warners also developed a website for the garden ([mcsoulpatch.wordpress.com](http://mcsoulpatch.wordpress.com)), which includes information on their mission and a "Stuff We Need" section.

**Network to get what you need.** Talk to as many people as you can about what you are doing, and be creative about who you approach. When Erik needed the land tilled to set up the garden, he went to a rental center that had tillers. But the rental center also had their own connections and associations to people who could help him with the project and donate time to plow the ground. You may be surprised by how willing people are to lend a hand where they can, especially if it's for a good cause.

**Find ways for lots of people to do little things—together it adds up to something big.** Some people who heard about the Soul Patch were able to spend several hours a week helping out. Others were able to just help for an hour, or donate a few plants. Instead of relying on a small number of people for most of your needs, offer smaller opportunities for lots of people to pitch in. It can add up.

**Explore funding opportunities that may be available to you.** It takes time to grow hundreds of pounds of food, and Erik knew he couldn't do it on his own, even with the help of his family and community volunteers. So he turned to some funding sources to hire part-time help in managing the garden. In doing so he not only hired someone who could help expand the capacity of the garden, he provided a new job in his community. Erik recommends checking out the Rural Minnesota Concentrated Employment Program and State Health Improvement Program as possible funding sources.

**Consider a variety of ways to support your mission.** Erik's primary goal was to feed food shelf patrons healthy produce they may not have had access to otherwise. While this mostly happened through food grown in the Soul Patch, he also found other ways to contribute to this mission.

For example, some food producers grow more food than they can harvest and sell and their fruits and vegetables are left to rot in the fields. "Gleaning" recoups some of this produce for food shelves when volunteers are able to go pick the fruits or vegetables after the normal harvest. Last year, Erik and his team were able to collect over 700 pounds of potatoes from a local field in just two afternoons.

The visibility of the Soul Patch also encouraged local hobby gardeners to donate their excess produce to the food shelf. Some were doing this already and Erik feared when they found out about his garden, they would stop donating. But the opposite happened. The profile of the garden made people aware of the fact that they could donate their homegrown food to the food shelf and inspired others to plant an extra row for this purpose.

**"Steal" other good ideas that have found success.** Erik says he really hopes that someone will look at the Soul Patch and "steal" his idea for his/her own community. One of the best ways to have success in your own project is to learn from others who have succeeded at similar endeavors.