

Better Health, Improved Nutrition To Sprout From Gardens At SIUE East St. Louis Center

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EDWARDSVILLE - With the start of the school year, students' hands are full of books, various technology, and now – some fresh produce, courtesy of the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville East St. Louis Center (ESLC) gardens.

“We have already given fresh tomatoes, cucumbers, and okra to our students and parents,” said SIUE East St. Louis Charter High School (CHS) Director Gina Jeffries, EdD. “We love giving away the fresh produce, just as much as they enjoy receiving it!”

“In addition to fresh produce, we are providing our patients with healthy recipes to assist them in meeting their health goals,” added Jerrica Ampadu, Ph.D., RN, CCP, WE CARE Clinic and Student Nurse Achievement Program (SNAP) director, coordinator for diversity and assistant professor in the SIUE School of Nursing’s Department of Family Health and Community Health (FHCH).

This fall semester yielded produce from the ESLC gardens after collaborative planning and work among the [CHS](#), SIUE’s [WE CARE Clinic](#), the SIUE School of Education Health and Human Behavior (SEHNB) [Nutrition and Dietetics Program](#), and [Make Health Happen East St. Louis](#), according to Jennifer Zuercher, Ph.D., associate professor in SEHNB’s Department of Applied Health and Nutrition and Dietetics graduate program director.



“We came together to support East St. Louis and provide fresh produce for members of the community,” explained Zuercher. “We are also offering opportunities for Charter High School students to learn different types of lessons in science, social studies, and more. We are presenting opportunities for SIUE nutrition and dietetics students at the WE CARE Clinic to teach the community lessons on how to prepare healthy meals and more. Finally, members of the community will benefit if they want to garden themselves.”

This is not the first time that the ESLC has had a garden, according to CHS teacher and lifelong gardener Aaron Vance.

“I started helping Rick Gregory (former staff member at Southwestern Illinois College) when he created a garden on the campus in 2010,” said Vance. “I would bring my classes out to help maintain the garden and work as needed.



“I have gardened in some capacity my entire life. I started with my grandfather at the age of 5, planting plants and pulling weeds. I started a food forest on my property at home. I also have fruit and nut trees, multiple types of berry bushes, and a flower garden. I plan on building a greenhouse soon. The benefits of gardening are plentiful. For instance, I would love to see the students create and run a small business of selling excess vegetables from the garden.”

The most obvious advantage of gardening is better health, noted CHS teacher Carolyn Kribs, who began working years ago with Vance regarding the reimplementation of gardens on the East St. Louis campus. “Organic food is critical to health. The vitamins and minerals found in fresh fruits and vegetables are such a benefit to our bodies. The people of East St. Louis deserve access to healthy food, and limitations to it is another consequence of the injustices prevalent in our society.”

Kribs’ sentiments were echoed by Janessia Slaughter, nutrition and dietetics graduate student in the WE CARE Clinic. “The gardens are critical because we need fruits and vegetables to have a healthy lifestyle and balanced diet,” she said.

Currently, there are 45 garden beds located on the southeast portion of the campus, said Zuercher. “Dr. Timothy Staples (ESLC executive director) and Augustin Bramwell (East St. Louis/Alton superintendent of operations) worked to put together the beds, fill the beds and get everything ready for us,” she said. “Then Make Health Happen East St. Louis was able to help support us through a Building Resilient Inclusive Communities grant.”

“The Illinois Public Health Institute invited us to help promote nutrition security, safe physical activity, and social connectedness in St. Clair County, especially those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic,” said Joey Fonseca-Islas, Make Health Happen board member and SNAP-Ed educator for the University of Illinois Extension. “Then we applied for and were awarded the [Building Resilient Inclusive Communities](#) (BRIC) grant through the National Association of Chronic Disease Directors. The WE CARE Clinic and East St. Louis Charter High School were identified as site partners to partake in a community garden revitalization project.”

“Everyone should have an idea of where their food comes from,” explained Vance. “Gardening is usually the first step in a journey to homesteading or farming. I don’t hear from many students who have a garden at home. So, I am glad that we are able to bring a gardening experience to them and the community.”

[The WE CARE Clinic](#) provides primary patient care on the SIUE East St. Louis Higher Education Campus, located on campus in Building D. Our staff includes an advanced Nurse Practitioner, a collaborating physician, a licensed clinical social worker, certified health coaches, a doctorally prepared pharmacist, and a registered dietitian. All of our providers provide full services to our diverse clients who reside in the metro-east and surrounding communities.

[The SIUE Charter High School](#) is a school of choice for families in the East St. Louis School District 189. The mission of the Southern Illinois University Edwardsville East St. Louis Charter High School is to prepare students who are career- and college-ready upon graduation. To achieve this mission, the school and its staff will positively impact the educational and economic lives of East St. Louis, Illinois youth through individualized instruction in core academic subjects, exploration of career interests and aptitudes, assistance in realizing students' talents, high academic goals, and expectations that graduates will become competitive employees for the 21st century.