

# UWEX AmeriCorps VISTA Success Story

## Eau Claire County

**By Laurelyn Sandkamp,  
Summer VISTA**

The Forest Street Community Garden is an Eau Claire collaboration focused on empowering urban residents with the vision, knowledge, and experience needed to grow their own food. The space, centrally located near Eau Claire's downtown and farmers market, offers fifty individual garden plots and a half-acre "shared garden." The "shared garden" model offers the opportunity for new gardeners to participate in regular work times, learning new skills and strengthening community connections. Shared garden members have the opportunity to take produce home after each work session, and the remainder of the harvest is shared with local hunger relief organizations.

The Forest Street Shared Garden was piloted during the summer of 2013. Volunteer opportunities were established, including roles for a volunteer coordinator, marketing and outreach coordinator, and harvest committee. While membership numbers were strong in the garden's pilot year, 2014 saw reduced volunteer interest and commitment. Many factors contributed to this decline, most notably a simple lack of outreach to prior members. In response to this need, Laurelyn Sandkamp, AmeriCorps\*VISTA, planned a mid-summer harvest festival at the garden's pavilion to help invite old volunteers back and attract new ones. The harvest festival provided an opportunity for the garden's 2013 leadership to re-establish connections with former volunteers, while creating a low-key atmosphere for potential new members to learn about the garden.

The meal was a veggie boil potluck, which made it simple for guests to contribute. Before the event, guests signed up to bring specific vegetables for the boil via Facebook. Ingredients included potatoes, carrots, greens, onions, and rutabaga. Of course, much of the produce we ate came straight from the garden as well! A local grocery store chain generously donated a \$50 gift card, which paid for brats and additional needed items. Attendees also contributed side dishes and all the cooking equipment. For simplicity,

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this event was advertised as a “green event,” and guests were asked to bring their own plates, cups, and silverware.

The event was a success! We had wonderful attendance from former, current, and new garden volunteers. There was plenty of good food and great conversation. After the meal, one of the garden founders (and former VISTA) Kerri Kiernan guided everyone on a plant walk around the space. Because of the success of this event, another is currently being planned for late summer. The mid-summer harvest festival provided a much-needed opportunity for garden stakeholders to reconvene and sparked renewed interest in the garden.