

**Submitted to: Home Depot**

**Submitted by: Capital District Community Gardens (CDCG)**

**Project: Gardening Education Center (Strategic Planning Phase)**

**Mission Statement**

Educating and engaging communities in gardening and urban greening and providing horticultural skills training -- this is our mission at Capital District Community Gardens.

**Our History**

Established in 1972, Capital District Community Gardens (CDCG) is a private, non-profit community service organization. Seven years ago we had a staff of two employees, 12 community gardens, and a budget of \$60,000 a year. Since then we have more than doubled our staff, more than tripled our budget and we now administer 39 gardens in three cities.

We're dedicated to working with people to foster self sufficiency through the rewards of gardening, helping families cut their living costs by growing food locally, transforming vacant lots into productive neighborhood garden spaces, and beautifying urban areas through landscaping and street tree programs.

Select local business leaders, who represent a cross-section of the community we serve, make up our **volunteer** Board of Directors and manage CDCG. Our Board actively serves on and coordinates volunteer committees on planning, promotions, fundraising, and membership.

**Project Mission**

Capital District Community Gardens (CDCG) is creating a one-of-a-kind regional Gardening Education Center that will provide hands-on horticultural education and job training to disadvantaged urban youth and provide gardening education and services to low-income communities in our five county area. This building will be more than just a shelter from the weather for class work. **Our vision** is to bring many people together to design and create a highly energy-efficient, passive solar meeting place with a working green house. This "place" of ours will be an asset to the neighborhood, the city, the state, and the planet.

**The need is extraordinary.** CDCG, with a staff of five, operates 39 cooperative neighborhood food gardens where more than 600 of our region's low-income families are able to move toward self-sufficiency by growing their own food. Although CDCG works with hundreds of low-income families each year and provides a tremendous amount of advice and information, CDCG lacks the facility and staff to support comprehensive and extended educational programs. And there is no other organization or program in our region that provides these resources to our inner-city residents.

Albany, Schenectady and Troy, three cities in our region, are home to many at-risk youth. Children and youth living in poverty face enormous challenges to avoid falling prey to drugs, violence, teen pregnancy, and dropping out of school. In our region, 24% of children in Albany, 21% in Schenectady, and 27% in Troy live in families below the poverty level, as determined by the 1990 census.

Out-of-school suspension rates ran from 15.1% in Albany city schools to 20% in Schenectady for 2001-2002. High School dropout rates for 2001-2002 in Albany and Schenectady city high

schools have been 6.2% and 6.8% respectively, with neither school achieving the state standard for those years, according to the New York State School Report Cards.

In addition, according to the New York State Department of Education, 73.8% of students in Albany school district (kindergarten through 6<sup>th</sup> grade) were eligible for free or reduced lunch; 68.1% in Schenectady and 70.3% in Troy were eligible. In one elementary school alone in Albany city, 100% of children were eligible for free or reduced lunch.

At-risk factors for alcohol and substance abuse by youths, formulated by the New York Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS), show us that our youth need help to avoid life-altering problems. (According to OASAS the lowest risk is 1; the highest risk is 55, and New York City is excluded from these statistics.) Total youth alcohol risk for Albany County is 31, for Schenectady County it's 18 for Rensselaer it's 32; total youth illicit drug risk for Albany County is 50, for Schenectady County it's 46, and for Rensselaer County it's 45. These reports show the high risks our youth face right here in our own communities.

The Gardening Education Center will have a very positive, long-term impact on our region and the program's participants – **job skills, business incubation, hunger relief, community revitalization and environment education.** As with all of CDCG's programming, this effort will be focuses on empowering individuals to improve their well being and the quality of life in their community.

Imagine our inner-city youth becoming engrossed in acquiring knowledge in our classroom, greenhouse and garden settings, leading to the mastery of marketable horticultural and work abilities. Emphasizing hands-on learning, the Center will provide a welcoming environment for our youth to grow, learn, and experiment. The Center's innovative programs will provide a framework for developing interpersonal relationships, leadership skills, and an atmosphere for people to invest in themselves – all critical traits for successful community redevelopment and individual growth.

### **Our Achievements**

**New Gardens:** Beginning in 2002 we started managing four community gardens in the City of Schenectady, NY. Although we have done work in Schenectady for many years – working with Schenectady 2000, Girls Inc., and Re-Tree Schenectady and helping to develop the community gardens that now exist in Hamilton Hill – this will be the first time that we will have a consistent and active presence in the City.

With the addition of the Schenectady Community Gardens, we will of course need to augment our annual budget to add another part-time garden worker, purchase additional garden sites and develop those sites. To that end, we look forward to gaining the support of, and working collaboratively with, other organizations and the city and county governments. We have no doubt that the Schenectady gardeners, garden sites and the city, as a whole, will greatly benefit from CDCG's involvement.

**Urban Greening:** CDCG works with local municipalities and community groups to improve the overall appeal of our cities and the quality of life for residents of the Capital Region of New York. Over the past 10 years we've planted hundreds of trees in the city of Troy, NY alone. The benefits include cleaner air, reduced energy consumption, improved aesthetics of business and residential areas, and increased property values.

**Fund Raising:** Each year CDCG holds a Spring Brunch to raise funds. 2002 was another successful year for our Spring Brunch, helping to raise a record-breaking \$23,000. As always, our guests were treated to a fabulous sampling of foods from more than 100 local restaurants and friends who prepare their special signature dishes each year. Brunch goers were also able to browse and bid on our large selection of silent auction items, which were generously provided by 140 local merchants. Other regular fundraising events include our Bowl-a-thon and our Fall Harvest and Craft Festival.

### **Description of Volunteer Involvement Opportunities**

As we do in all of our programming, CDCG will collaborate with a wide range of groups to develop and implement our Gardening Education Center. Existing youth programs in our area have expressed a strong interest in providing the at-risk youth that they serve with practical gardening and environmental education. Therefore, the Center and its programs will most definitely focus on educating and training disadvantaged urban youth and will work with existing youth and school groups in our area such as the Boys & Girls Club and Head Start.

We also will need volunteers to assist with the planning of the Gardening Education Center. We will need the expertise of environmental specialists in many fields who can help us plan, design, and build a “green” building that will make use of environmentally friendly materials and take advantage of passive solar design.

More than 300 volunteers dedicate thousands of hours working with CDCG's staff each year on various projects including new garden development, street tree plantings, landscaping projects, equipment repair, special events, and office support. Professionals also provide in-kind legal, engineering, and design services. In addition, we utilize between 4 - 6 student interns each semester who work between 10 and 40 hours per week on a wide variety of projects. We rely on these interns and volunteers to provide critical support for our programs each year through thousands of donated hours. **Without volunteers we could not operate!**

### **Project Budget and Other Funding Sources**

The total budget for the two-year planning phase of this project is \$86,500. These funds are needed to conduct a thorough strategic planning process, develop a comprehensive program and business plan and initiate a capital campaign for the Gardening Education Center.

We are actively working to raise these funds from local foundations, area institutions and socially-conscious national entities, like Home Depot. The Bender Family Foundation, a local family, has given their vote of confidence along with a \$15,000 commitment to this effort that they said “shows a great sense of responsibility to the community and to our organization.” The foundation gift comes as a challenge to individuals, businesses and local institutions from whom we are now seeking to match their generous grant.

The two-acre parcel of land that will be the site of the Center has already been secured. New York State donated this land, valued at \$85,000, to CDCG, under the leadership of two local representatives (Senator Bruno and Assemblyman Canestrari) who have been involved in this project's plan from the inception. In addition, RPI purchased and recently demolished an abandoned building that sat between the State land and land already owned by CDCG. RPI is in the process of deeding that land to CDCG.

The Center has already attracted strong interest from two of our community partners. Cornell Cooperative Extension of Rensselaer County has declared their desire to use our facility for joint

education programming and also their interest in renting our greenhouse space. RPI, located just a few blocks from our location, has indicated that they will use our Center and outdoor space for environmental research projects. This collaboration with RPI has tremendous potential to attract support from various funding sources outside of our region and reach as a local nonprofit community service organization.

With our strategic plan completed, we are confident that we will be able to raise the funds needed from New York State and from local private funding sources for the creation of the Center. Our legislative leaders have indicated that future financial support from the State for the facility's creation will be very likely. As part of their neighborhood renewal initiative, we also anticipate financial assistance from RPI for the Center's development. Preliminary inquiries into the community, schools, political leaders and potential funders are all very supportive and promising for the successful completion of this effort.

CDCG requests funding of \$10,000 from Home Depot to help pay for the Gardening Education Center feasibility study. Without your help we still have a large distance to reach across financially to make our plans happen and to make an important difference for the at-risk youth of New York's Capital Region. With Home Depot's visionary assistance we know we can make a difference for our at-risk youth and our entire community.