

Katie Johnson: Good morning, and welcome to Apple A Day, Lake Region Health Care's health and wellness segment that we feature weekly to talk about news in the health and wellness world. It is spring. The sun has been shining. The temperatures have warmed up and it just seems natural to talk about our community garden.

Jason Bergstrand is my guest this morning to do just that. Good morning, Jason.

Jason Bergstrand: Good morning. Thanks for having me.

Katie Johnson: Thanks for coming in. As I mentioned, the weather has us all thinking about outdoor projects and gardening and getting those fingers in the dirt and the seeds in the ground. Let's start by talking about maybe we have some listeners out there who haven't heard about our community garden before, Lake Region Takes Root. Gives us just a snapshot of what the project is.

Jason Bergstrand: Sure. We're starting our fourth year. Four years ago, we had this vision of creating a community garden that would meet the needs of growing produce for families that have more difficulty in accessing healthy foods. All the produce that we grow, collectively as a community, goes to the Women, Infants & Children's program all throughout [Ar-tale 00:01:03] county, as well as the food shelves, Fergus Falls, Battle Lake and Pelican Rapids.

Katie Johnson: You said this is the fourth year. What kind of growth and numbers in terms of ... How much food have you been able to provide through the years?

Jason Bergstrand: Great question. The first year we grew about 1600 pounds. Second years, about 4500 pounds and then last year, just short of 8000 pounds. Almost doubling year after year. I'm not so sure we're going to get 16,000 pounds this year, but we will certainly flirt with 10 or 12, I'm sure.

Katie Johnson: Wow, that's fantastic. Let's talk a little bit about what kinds of produce are we talking about? What is grown at the garden?

Jason Bergstrand: Everything from A to Z, really. From asparagus to zucchini. I think we counted up 26 to 30 different types of things that we grow. When I say asparagus, it's literally growing right now. We were out there yesterday. Some of it is even too far gone. I didn't see it fast enough. It's already 24 inches high. Others of it is just peeking out of the ground, so we'll keep our eyes on that and get that harvested.

That's really exciting for us because last year we planted the crowns, and usually asparagus takes two, three, maybe four years before you can start harvesting it. I would say 50% of the plants that we planted last year, they're already mature enough where we can harvest them.

That's a really exciting piece of what we do. We try to integrate as many perennial things as possible so it's less work for us, so if we have the fruit trees with the

apples, plums, cherries and pears, those are things that we can grow each year with very little effort. Of course, raspberries, asparagus and strawberries. We planted about 100 plants of strawberries yesterday, too.

Katie Johnson: Wow, that's fantastic. You mentioned it is called a community garden. It's about the community collectively growing these things. That takes volunteers and this is really a volunteer-led effort.

Jason Bergstrand: It is. If you're interested in helping us out, we'd love to have you come out. You do not have to have any gardening experience at all really. What I would say is just have a passion for helping your community. We can work with you.

There's always something for anyone to do, and even if you can't come out to the garden physically because you're not in that position to do that, or the times that we're out there just doesn't work in your schedule, there are other ways that you can help make this effort move forward. I would encourage you to give us a call. You can call the Lake Region Health Care and ask for the volunteer coordinator, or you can call [Ot-a-tope 00:03:56] Public Health and ask for me, Jason Bergstrand, and we'll get you connected.

Our individual volunteers are extremely helpful. We start May 16th. That's right around the corner. We operate Mondays and Thursdays from 9 to noon, but we're also very flexible. We work with folks after hours, on the weekends. I had a student from the high school that worked just last Saturday on her own. We've had two church groups out on Saturdays already because of the great weather that we've had, so we had a great little start here to our spring planting season. It's the groups that really push us forward, so when we can get 6, 8, 10 or 12 people out there, we get caught up on our daily chores and then we get to one of our infrastructure projects that we want to get to.

Katie Johnson: Let's talk a little bit about what you have for projects in the lineup this year and what you foresee being the priority needs for this year.

Jason Bergstrand: We started a packing shed in the fall, but we need to put the roof on that and frame up the upper half. Then we want to include a rainwater collection system on that particular site, as well as three other potential areas in our garden for rainwater collection. Right there at that same location, we want to roll that into our sensory garden area as well. We're going to be adding more pavers so it's a little bit more accessible for people that might have some walking difficulties, or in a wheelchair and they can get around.

The sensory garden is really exciting because as the title says, we really want to connect people with all 5 senses. The hearing, the smelling, the touching ... All those different things that associate with being outdoors and being in the garden. This would be a great opportunity to open the eyes of kids as well as older folks and incorporate the arts as well. This is really exciting for us to be taking on that.

We have a little retaining wall we need to build. We're always building new, additional raised beds. There's a little bit more of an area where we can increase that opportunity there. Lastly, we'd like to build what we call cold frames. The cold frames go over our raised beds and that allows us to start earlier in the spring and also grow later in the fall, so you can keep the heat into the garden.

Katie Johnson: That's one of the things I think is so impressive about the garden. It's beautiful. It's a beautiful place to be, but it's also so diverse. It's really a showcase for the many different gardening methods that are available to a person.

Jason Bergstrand: It's really been one of our main goals is to make sure it becomes an outdoor classroom [inaudible 00:06:53]. We want people who have experience, like master gardeners, to come out. Think about us and do a workshop out there. Maybe you just want to plug a particular method that we have, like the square-foot gardening or the raised beds, vertical gardening, whatever it might be. It is out there and that was a main goal of ours. We didn't want to get tunnel vision. We wanted to make sure that we incorporated all sorts of different elements.

Katie Johnson: When you talked about volunteers and the real only requirement being a passion for helping your community, let's tell some stories about how it really does make a difference, how access to nutrient dense, locally grown food really does make a difference in the health of people that live right here in our neighborhoods.

Jason Bergstrand: Absolutely. We have some of the families that receive the produce come out and help us as well. Probably the biggest thing that we hear from them is, especially when they bring out their children. They never thought that their child would actually eat a green bean directly from the plant. They're like, "There's no way. I'm going to need to cook that, or put some butter on it or salt or something." They just sit there and chomp it fresh, and they just love it. Parents then get encouraged by that and want to incorporate some of those foods then at home, so that's a big plus to us right there.

The volunteers. I've seen friendships start because of the garden. We have people who actually sit down, work across from each other. Work on a project planting a row of peas, for instance, and they start talking to each other and by the end of the day, they actually start exchanging phone numbers and saying, "Let's meet for coffee next week." That's a really neat thing, too. There's a social element that goes on.

I had a gal that was a little bit older and she actually came out to the garden for physical therapy. She was getting help here at the hospital, and that was great, but then she was able to take that and apply it. She said, "Really, this is the best therapy for me because I'm using all my muscles and I'm at the same time helping somebody in the process."

Katie Johnson: We talk a lot about the 7 components of wellness, and I think the garden most certainly must touch on all 7 of them, which is really fantastic. We've been talking

about the location, but I don't think we've actually told people where the garden is.

Jason Bergstrand: The actual physical location is 260 Kennedy Park Circle, and that's just behind the walk-in clinic and Mark's Sand & Gravel. As you start to go down the hill, take your first right and the garden sits between two brick condominiums up on the top of the hill.

Katie Johnson: It's just a fantastic place that is, again, making a difference in the community and could really use the help of more volunteers in 2016 as we maybe try to surpass that 10,000 pound food mark and, again, impacting the lives of Women, Infants & Children families and food shelf families throughout the county. Anything else that we've missed today, Jason, that you want to mention before we wrap up?

Jason Bergstrand: No, I don't think so, but I will give out the number one more time here. If you're interested in volunteering with us, you can call Laura at 736-8498 and just let her know that you're interested in connecting with us. It doesn't matter if you're available for 30 minutes or all summer long, we'd love to have you connect with us and see what's going on.

Katie Johnson: Sounds great. Jason Bergstrand, project coordinator at Lake Region Takes Root, Lake Region Health Care's community garden, my guest today on Apple A Day, inviting all of you to help us make the community garden even bigger and better in 2016.

Katie Johnson, along with Jason Bergstrand on Apple A Day reminding you there is so much to do here. Stay healthy for it. Have a great day!