

Overview of the La Casa Garden in Urbana, IL
submitted to Project Orange Thumb, February 2006,
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Overall Vision

The La Casa Garden (since 2003) is a demonstration of Ecological Garden Design in Urbana, Illinois. Urbana is home to one the University of Illinois: of the nation's largest research universities. The La Casa Garden is less than ¼ mile from downtown Urbana, in the backyard of La Casa Collectiva, a co-operative house used by University of Illinois graduate students (since 1974). The garden provides multiple functions, including education, delicious produce, and water management, while promoting ecological design. Garden projects are coordinated by the Urbana Permaculture Project, a non-profit corporation which promotes ecological and edible community gardening in Urbana. Projects at the La Casa Garden also involve the many diverse strands of independent gardening currently making Urbana a beautiful garden city.

Goals

The La Casa Garden has 3 main goals:

- To synthesize Ecological Gardening and Edible Landscaping in a beautiful, accessible community garden that invites public participation.
- To demonstrate the seven layers of productivity which are possible in an ecological landscape: (1) canopy trees, (2) dwarf fruit trees, (3) shrubs, (4) vines, (5) herbaceous, (6) groundcovers, (7) tubers.
- To integrate all the ecological functions of the site: plant symbioses, compost, water management, social activities, built structures, etc.

Objectives

The La Casa Garden has 5 objectives for the 2006 growing season:

- To develop a garden with more than 100 edible and useful plant species by the end of year 2006. (See attached species list circa March 2005.)
- To establish a reliable infrastructure of maintenance, including tools, mowing services, regular meetings and known roles for participation in the maintenance of the La Casa Garden.
- To establish a paid internship in Ecological Garden Design, hosted on-site, and managed by the Urbana Permaculture Project.
- To educate the local community through the Master Gardeners program, the UI Extension service, class trips, and public events such as tours, workshops, and demonstrations.
- To create a beautiful, functional landscape as a portrait of Ecological Garden Design.

Garden Plans

The La Casa Garden contains vegetables grown in raised beds, fruit trees grown in supportive "plant guilds", bamboo groves, and wetland plants in a swale. Currently, most plants in the garden are mulched every year with compost and hay or other inexpensive organic mulch materials. The raised beds are planted with annuals in the spring, and the remainder of the site is planted in perennials. There are more than 25 fruit trees on the site and they are surrounded by "plant guilds" - assemblages of supporting plants. For instance, a plant guild around an apple tree would include bulbous and taprooting plants to create a diversity of root environments underground, while covering the soil and smothering grasses aboveground; insectary plants such as dill and fennel are placed carefully to attract insectivorous wasps; chives are planted near the trunk to keep the rabbits off the bark. There are also several species of bamboo planted on the perimeter of the garden as part of a bamboo trial project in which bamboo growth patterns are monitored and compared. A large swale was dug in 2003, and several little diversion channels have been dug in the following years, in order to minimize water-logging and allow proper drainage for garden plants.

The house on site (La Casa) provides compost and volunteer labor during the growing season. The Urbana Permaculture project organizes an internship, workdays, and several one-time events such as garden tours and demonstrations of Ecological Gardening techniques on the site. The 2006 plan is to complete the perennial plant installation and commence the next phase of refining the established system. The plan is to add maintenance and documentation functions via the internship, and supply the garden with all the resources necessary to maintain the site in future years.

Community Involvement

La Casa (the house itself) is part of the Community of Urbana-Champaign Housing (COUCH - www.couch.coop). The vision for the La Casa Garden has come primarily from the Urbana Permaculture Project, a local non-profit which facilitates community gardening, ecological design, and edible landscaping. This year, the Urbana Permaculture Project is sponsoring an internship in Ecological Design at the La Casa Garden, and there are plans to have 2 interns on-site in 2007. Other 2006 events include a tour of the seven bamboo species on site, a workshop on Ecological Design, and a peach picking party! (There are seven peach trees on site, planted in 2003.) The 2006 garden intern is planning to manage the raised beds using the bio-intensive system, so there is now discussion of a future workshop on bio-intensive growing methods. A core group of 4-5 people make most of the decisions about major garden plans, a few dozen participate directly in implementing garden plans, and we lose count of how many people enjoy or use the garden on an informal basis.

The La Casa Garden, and all events hosted on site are open to the public. The garden has become a curious little hideaway nook for people in downtown Urbana looking for refuge from the hardscape, (downtown Urbana is less than 1% greenspace). The La Casa Garden provides an oasis of edible plants, garden benches, and, quite often, a few local gardeners, house residents, or community members enjoying the calm. The garden is also one of the few areas left in the suburb where people congregate around a campfire in the evening, pull out a guitar, and sing songs together.

Need for Support

Thus far, the La Casa Garden has been managed with garden tools from garage sales, a rusted second-hand wheelbarrow, and perennial plants propagated by volunteers. In 2003 and 2004, there were perennial plant installations sponsored by the Urbana Permaculture Project, but otherwise the gardening team has had to come up with their own supplies and materials. This has created a situation in which people show up to a work-day with their garden tools, then leave with them afterwards. We first encountered Fiskars' long-handled loppers in this way - an exquisite cutting tool that never seems to go dull!

The Project Orange Thumb grant would help transition the site in to a well-endowed permanent community garden of the Urbana landscape. The Fiskars tools would be labeled "Property of the La Casa Garden" and reside in the garden shed which is only used by participants involved in the La Casa Garden. The grant of materials would be used to buy perennials, mulch, and other garden necessities. This grant would be a major step forward for the La Casa Garden. It would help the garden to reach the next level of independent organization, at which permanent perennial installments are complete, high quality tools are maintained and available on site, and regular events are hosted at the garden to demonstrate the viability of Ecological Garden Design to the local community.

Other support and involvement

In the past, the La Casa Garden has received in-kind support from the City of Urbana, the University of Illinois Master Gardeners Association, the Urbana Media Center, and the Illinois Student Environmental Network. Monetary support has come from La Casa, COUCH, the Urbana Permaculture Project, and volunteer gardeners. This year the Urbana Permaculture Project is paying a stipend for a part-time intern working on the garden, La Casa is providing some financial support and the Master Gardeners are listing the La Casa Garden on a garden tour, thus helping spread the word about the site. Total site budget for all combined funding streams is currently \$1,500 for 2006, so the value added by the Project Orange Thumb grant could effectively double the size of the La Casa Garden budget for 2006. It would be a tremendous boost for the garden!