

A Community Asset



Linda Stemen's story is a familiar one to many Michiganders - a struggling economy equaled a job loss. So she turned to something she knew and loved – gardening.

Transplanted from Ohio over 25 years ago when her husband's job brought them north, Linda is carving out a new way of making a living on their land in Mikado Township in northeastern Michigan. Her current 75' x 225' plot is lush with fruits (grape vines, apple trees, blueberries, raspberries, and strawberries), vegetables (potatoes, onions, spinach, beets, garlic, tomatoes, peppers, asparagus, and beans galore) and plenty of herbs. This year she even harvested over a bushel of nuts from the walnut tree in her yard.

"I grew up gardening," said Linda. Over the years she became a Master Gardener and a Master Composter. She's now doing Vermiculture (using worms to recycle food scraps and other organic material into a valuable soil amendment) and making compost tea (a nutrient-rich liquid extracted during the composting process). "The

WISEWOMAN Entrepreneurial Gardening Program has been a great fit," said Linda. "It's allowed me to do more in my garden. This year I was able to purchase some beekeeping equipment."

As a former Volunteer Manager, 4H Coordinator and Extension Educator with Michigan State University Extension, Linda had the opportunity to learn a lot about her community.

Her small community of mostly retirees boasts the non-profit Alcona Local Foods Association. The association recently received a United States Department of Agriculture grant to purchase 8-9 community and individual hoopouses. The group has also started a farmers market, is working on the development of a food hub and hopes to create an incubator kitchen. All of which Linda has a hand in.

"We're definitely a close-knit community," said Linda which is something she plans to tap into. "We may be small (in population), but we have a library, a general store, a civic center, the VFW hall - several place where we can gather large groups of people. All of which have the potential as great venues for classes. Linda hopes to teach other WISEWOMAN gardeners and community members on the management aspects of a food business, sound gardening practices and community gardening.

In addition to sharing what she has learned with others, Linda also has plans to grow perennial vegetables, expand her beekeeping, sell at the local farmers markets in Alcona County and Tawas and expand her outdoor gardening space at home and at the community garden where she also has plots and a hoopouse.

"Everyone needs to grow something they eat," said Linda. "It gives you a whole new appreciation for your food."

