On a perfect early spring day, a group of Utah State University students waited nervously at the Community Gardens in Hyde Park for their visitors from the Developmental Skills Lab to arrive. After months of planning and mountains of details, only one question remained for Eric Manrique, who was heading up the project.

"Do you think it's hard enough for the wheelchairs?" he asked, poking a toe in the dirt.

Manrique and 10 other members of the MGMT 3110 class People and Organizations had been assigned to take a service project or fundraiser into the community. After deciding they could help meet the needs of individuals with disabilities, they began researching local organizations, including Common Ground, Options for Independence and Project PEER.

"Something just clicked with DSL," Manrique said. "It's the perfect opportunity for us."

The group of 11 students met with Shane Johnson, associate director of development at the CPD, for a brief introduction to disability before the gardening event.

"It was great to see students from diverse backgrounds—not SPED students—take an interest in working with people with disabilities and really embracing the difficulty of it," Johnson said. "We promised them that if they embraced their reluctance and discomfort, that they'd really enjoy it."

If the smiles and laughter were any indication, enjoy it they did.

"It's been fun to get together with them," said Kayla Hastings. "At the beginning I was super nervous, because I don't really know any people with disabilities, but Shane told us at the orientation, it's going to be uncomfortable and you need to be OK with being uncomfortable. It's been amazing. They're my friends—they're just like me, they just might have a different way of doing things."

At the garden's raised beds, students and DSL participants and staff introduced themselves by telling their name, along with their favorite fruit and vegetable. Then, they went to work.

Caleb Dart helped Heidi Hill plant kale.

"You pull the plants out of the plastic container and spread out the root ball and make it real soft," Dart said. "Let's make our hole a little bit bigger, and then we'll put it in the hole and cover it up. Good job Heidi! That's how we plant the kale. Now it'll grow nice and tall because of you!"

Manrique said the group received assistance from other community resources, like a truckload of adaptive tools from the AT lab and information on raised garden beds from the Utah Conservation Corps.

"It was a lot of work, and at times we wondered what we had signed ourselves up for," Manrique said.

The project was assigned in January, and the group met weekly since February to iron out the details, said Dart.

"There are 11 groups doing similar projects, but this is the only one we know of that deals with disability," he said.

"Between the synergy of our group and the others, we're super psyched," said classmate Layne Lawson.

Camille Bay agreed.

"The enthusiasm of the other groups got us so excited," she said.

DSL staff members were pleased with the event.

"It's wonderful," said Daurie Bastian. "They're doing really well!"

Program coordinator Drake Rasmussen agreed.
“It’s pretty awesome,” he said. “A couple of community members showed up too. It’s something fun for the participants to do.”

But the garden wasn’t the end of the project. The following Friday, the students arrived at DSL with all the necessities of a pizza party, including homemade dough and sauce. Introductions were made again, with favorite pizza toppings announced by each person. A ‘store’ was set up on one end of the activity room near the kitchen, complete with a cash box and individual bags of pepperoni, pineapple, mushrooms and other pizza ingredients.

In a quick lesson on basic finance and how to work with money, participants played games to ‘win’ packets of fake money that they used to buy extra goodies for their cheese pizzas.

Students helped each participant roll out a ball of fresh pizza dough and top it with their chosen ingredients.

While waiting for their pizzas to bake, the students and participants headed to another room to make bird feeders from pine cones, peanut butter and bird seed.

“I have a great deal of respect for the people that work here,” said Ryan McLeod. “We spent a small amount of time here, but they’re here all the time. My heart goes out to the families. I want to help them even more, because I’ve realized how much just a little can do.”

For more photos, visit our Facebook album here.