

COMMUNITY

Colchester community gardeners hope for rebound

BY MARY M. LANE • FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER • MONDAY, APRIL 26, 2010

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If at first you don't succeed, plant, plant again.

Community gardeners at the Macrae Farm Community Gardens in Colchester are gearing up for the 2010 planting season, hoping to avoid the wet, cool [weather](#) that plagued the 2009 growing season and yielded below-average harvests.

Last year was the garden's inaugural season, and green-thumbed enthusiasts had high hopes for the dark brown, nutrient-rich soil once part of a working farm, said Cyndi Haselton, 55, who is on the board of the Colchester Land Trust, which oversees the gardens.

The 10 gardeners last year worked hard to plant crops such as corn, squash and tomatoes on the 30,000-square-foot plot but saw their efforts set back by a cold snap in late May and early June. The surprise chill made it difficult for some seeds and vine crops to germinate, said Jim Flint, executive director of Friends of Burlington Gardens who helped the Macrae Farm gardens get started.

Perpetually wet soil was also a negative factor. A total of 10.5 inches of rain fell in the Burlington area in May and June -- between 2 and 4 inches more than the average rainfall for those months, according to [National Weather Service](#) data.

'A lack of sunshine contributed to the continuously wet ground,' Flint said.

"This led to infestations of slugs and earwigs, and the spread of fungal diseases such as 'late blight,' which decimated tomato crops in the Northeast," Flint said.

Macrae Farm gardeners could not start planting until June, Haselton said. Before fencing could be installed to ward off deer and other wildlife, archaeologists had to scour the historical site to confirm there were no artifacts buried in the area.

This year, gardeners can start earlier. The land has been divided into 20, 25-foot-square plots, which aspiring gardeners can rent for \$45. A half plot is enough to yield enough crops for a small family, said Haselton, so half-plot rentals for \$25 are also available.

The trust is accepting applications for plots and half-plots that they will distribute on May 8. "If you have your registration in by then, you can come down and pick your plot," she said.

Despite the challenges of mercurial weather, participation in community gardens is growing. Chittenden County has about 60 community-based gardens, about half of which are in Burlington, Flint said.

"It's a good community project to get to know your neighbors," said Haselton, who emphasized the [health benefits](#) of community farming. "You get to grow fresh vegetables, and you know where they came from, and we ask people not to use chemical fertilizers so it can be 'green.'"



EMILY McMANAMY, Free Press

Jennifer Ely (right), executive director of the Winooski Valley Parks District, and Emily Gennari, president of the Colchester Land Trust, are accepting applications for garden plots at the Macrae Farm Community Gardens in Colchester.

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by Steven Bertoni, Keren Blazideck, Duncan Greenberg and Claire Obusan, 03.18.10, 06:00 PM EDT

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Gardening Tips

Charlie Nardozi, a garden consultant and coach from Shelburne, has been growing crops in Vermont for more than 30 years. Here are some of his tips:

- Unless you're gardening on sandy soil, raised beds make gardening more productive and easier. The soil dries out and warms up faster in spring, allowing you to plant sooner. You're not stepping on the soil so the soil doesn't become compacted, and root crops especially can thrive.
- Grow small rows of quick-maturing crops such as lettuce, radishes and beans and replant every 2-3 weeks until summer to extend the harvest season. You'll get a constant supply of these veggies through the summer and avoid the glut of too many crops maturing all at once.
- Grow small, quick-maturing veggies such as lettuce, spinach and radishes around slower-maturing larger crops such as tomatoes, squash and broccoli. The quick-maturing veggies will grow and thrive in the spaces between plants. By the time the larger plants fill in, you'll have harvested the smaller veggies.
- Mulching your plant rows and between established plants with straw, untreated grass clippings, shredded bark or leaves helps build the soil, conserve soil moisture, and prevent weed growth. Mulch after plants are well established, weeding well before applying the mulch.

On The Web:

www.CharlieNardozi.com

Haselton's daughter, Hannah, 25, pointed out the long-term [savings](#) on food.

"You're getting a huge yield for only \$45," she said. "If you're buying organic vegetables you can spend that really easily at the store."

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