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Women initiate community garden projects

By Julia Melloni
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With a constant renewed interest in eating fresh vegetables and growing your own food, folks are branching out from their own backyards to garden with neighbors and friends in community gardens.

Burlington has several community garden sites throughout the city that serve as models for designs turning up in rural towns and city centers throughout the state. With grant funding from the Vermont Community Foundation, Friends of Burlington Gardens approved five community garden grant applications this month from Newport, St. Albans, Colchester, Huntington and Vergennes.

Jim Flint, executive director of Friends of Burlington Gardens (FBG), received five mini-grant applications, all of which were approved for funding. The \$500 mini-grants cover material costs with free technical support from FBG. The projects will break ground this fall to make way for garden planting in the spring of 2009.

The community garden plans for the five towns vary from gardens in the Winooski Valley Park District that will use a solar-powered pump to move water from the Winooski River to the garden plots, to gardening on historic land in Vergennes under the stewardship of Northlands Job Corps Center. As diverse as the sites are for the new community gardens, each project has one thing in common: they've all been initiated by women.

"It's remarkable that each of these community gardens is driven by a woman," Flint said. "In some cases, these women have worked with benevolent land owners to host a community garden because public land wasn't available."

Beth Holtzman, outreach education coordinator for the Women's Agricultural Network, said the group "comes into contact with many women for whom growing food is an expression of their desire to connect with the earth and to actively nurture the community in which they live.

"I suspect that the number of women involved with organizing community gardens reflects women's concern with community-building, health and their larger societal role in the 'food security' of the family," she said.

The Women's Agricultural Network is a collaboration between University of Vermont Extension and the Department of Agriculture.

Through negotiations and research, each woman found a way to get approval from their community to create a site where farmers and gardeners can grow food for themselves, for others or for sale.

In Huntington, Alissa White approached the owners of the Keir Farm, Megs and Duncan Keir, to organize a community garden site on Richmond Road. About 10 years ago, the Keirs purchased a 10-acre parcel of land to preserve green space for the village. Flint said White's

well-organized approach of bringing people together has created a special opportunity for building community in a rural town.

"You don't usually see something like this in an outlying town. This is a new concept of harmony between farming and gardening and there's a place for people to grow their own food or grow food for others," Flint said. "In this scenario, White has created a place where there is something for everyone."

Anne Patrice Holdrige of Westfield designed the Newport Community Garden, which will be located on private land overlooking Lake Memphremagog, includes handicapped-accessible raised beds and small plots, and is accessible via public transportation.

Holly Creeks planned the St. Albans Community Garden, which involves a partnership between the Open Doors after-school program, the St. Albans Recreation Department, and the newly formed Friends of St. Albans Community Gardens. The garden is located on school district land adjacent to the St. Albans City School.

Keri Brown and a steering committee launched the Vergennes Community Garden in June. Mayor Mike Daniels rolled up his sleeves and plowed the land with his own farm equipment. The Vergennes Community Garden is an example of community collaboration with help from UVM Master Gardens, Northland Job Corps and the city of Vergennes.

Emily Gennari, along with the Colchester Land Trust, have planned a community garden for the Macrae Farm in Colchester. The Macrae Farm is located in the Intervale on public land owned by the Winooski Valley Park District. The community garden will be located in a field beside the Winooski River. Because there is no electricity and no city water, a solar-powered pump will be used to take water to the garden. Gennari said there is an enormous need for community gardening with 17,000 people living in Colchester.

"It's dreadful that Americans rely on canned and frozen vegetables or buy produce that is shipped from California," Gennari said. "We should be able to eat things that are locally grown." Information

Funding is still available and a second grant application deadline is set for today. Visit the Friends of Burlington Garden's Web site at www.burlingtongardenss.org for more information and a mini-grant application.
