

The article below was first published in the October issue of The Commons, Brattleboro's monthly newspaper. The article was written in September, 2007 by VCGN member Jane Michaud.

Photos to illustrate the VCGN published version of the article were taken by Jim Flint during a site visit on August 26, 2007.

Growing together: Community gardens take root

by Jane Michaud

Corn, beans, squash, tomatoes, broccoli ... these are just a few of the large variety of crops harvested by participants in the three Brattleboro Area Community Gardens. Gardeners are now picking the last of their summer yields, tending their cool-weather vegetables, and preparing to put their gardens to bed for the winter, as POS reflects on the past two years of the community gardens it initiated.



Post Oil Solutions' plan to promote community gardening grew out of its mission to advance cooperative, sustainable communities. This includes localization of food production, and supporting individual gardeners was deemed a key element. It was recognized that many residents wishing to grow their own vegetables might not have appropriate space at home to garden, and would benefit from gardening in community, learning from one another.

So, in the fall of 2006, several POS members distributed flyers around Brattleboro to gauge local interest in community gardening. After receiving many positive responses, they started looking for suitable space -- land that was arable, accessible, and with a water source. Retreat Healthcare offered a lease for a half-acre field on Upper Dummerston Rd., less than a quarter mile from the intersection of Rte. 30, that had been gardened communally in the past.



A tag sale was organized to raise funds, a grant applied for, and private donations gratefully accepted. The group then drew up participant guidelines, including the request that gardeners grow organically -- no chemical pesticides, herbicides, or fertilizers. The first participants met at a start-up meeting the following April. An official groundbreaking took place a month later, when Jay Bailey and Bekah Murchison of Fair Winds Farm, along with Tim Tyler from Guilford, volunteered to plow up the field with their teams of draft horses.

The Upper Dummerston Rd. Community Garden is comprised of 26 10'x20' plots, centered around a circle of perennials. Participants are charged a nominal fee for the season, and are responsible for planting and maintaining their individual plots. Mesh fencing keeps the deer out, compost bins collect sod and vegetation, and a water trough is filled from a nearby house. A core committee of gardeners, including part-time coordinator Dora Bouboulis, oversees management of the site.



Participants share the tasks necessary to maintaining the common spaces. Plots have been made available to anyone in the Brattleboro area on a first-come, first-served basis, and gardeners range from neophytes to those with years of experience. Although most grow vegetables and herbs, marigolds, sunflowers, and other blooms brighten the site. Gardeners from the Drop-in Center are recent participants.



A second community garden was started this past summer at the School for International Training (SIT) by two graduate students there, with help from POS. Located at the far end of the campus, the site is divided into 13 plots. Participants include SIT students and staff, as well as gardeners from the wider community. SIT faculty member and gardening expert Robert King was instrumental in bringing this project to fruition. Work-study student Chris Adams will continue oversight of the garden into the 2008 growing season.

A third garden, in back of Academy School in West Brattleboro, was organized by POS member Louise Rader and Assistant Principal Liz Dunn for the parents and students of the elementary school. This garden takes the form of three raised beds, tended cooperatively by parents, students, and teachers at Academy. They planted pumpkins last spring, tended them over the summer, and will harvest them in time for Halloween.



These three POS-sponsored gardens have received invaluable support from folks throughout the community. Alan Smith



from the Retreat Farm donated and spread composted manure, Dean Hamilton of Whetstone Valley Farm delivered compost, hay, and topsoil, and Brown & Roberts Hardware granted a generous discount on gardening supplies. Another valuable resource was the Vermont Community Garden Network, of which Brattleboro Area Community Gardens is a member. Under the auspices of Friends of Burlington Gardens, this statewide network provides connections to other Vermont community gardens through monthly newsletters and periodic regional gatherings, and awards mini-grants once a year.

Post Oil Solutions would like every area resident who wants to grow food to have a place to do so, close to home. The group continues to gauge the need for additional garden sites and to look for suitable land, and welcomes input from residents. POS believes that the long-time tradition of community gardening will continue to be an important part of food security as we plan for a post-oil society.

For further information about the Brattleboro Area Community Gardens, see the POS website: postoilsolutions.org, or call Jane Michaud at 257-8533, or Dora Bouboulis at 254-7319.