

More Gardeners, More Garden Plots at Montpelier Community Garden

by Sylvia Fagin

Last Saturday, under a blue sky flecked with wispy white clouds, over 20 people labored and laughed together at the Montpelier North Branch Community Garden at the North Branch Nature Center (NBNC) on Elm Street. Half a dozen or so worked at the perimeter, digging post holes for an eight-foot deer fence. Inside the garden, men, women, and children worked, chatting and joking across the invisible boundaries between plots.

A community garden plot is an option for those who live in apartments or on small lots without garden space, or those who like some company while gardening. Jennifer Lathrop and her 16-month-old son, Owen, dug in the kids' play area with a few of Owen's peers. This is Lathrop's fourth summer at the community garden. This year, she and her family have taken on a second plot. "We live in town, and we don't feel comfortable growing vegetables in our soil. We connected with [the idea of] growing some of our own food, and doing it with like-minded folks in the community is just great." Owen and his friends snacked while she talked, and of the bits that fell to the ground, someone cheered, "natural compost!"

Nearby, 11-year-old Luke Hammer helped unload wood chips from the back of a pickup truck and spread them on the four-foot-wide path that crosses the garden.

Asked what he likes about the garden, Luke replied, "I like it when it's summer and there's actual things to eat, when you're working and hungry you can just eat something."

For now, the actual things to eat are a gleam in the gardener's eye and a leap of faith and creativity. Some have waited years to be here. "It was the happiest day when I got that phone call," recalled Linda Hogan, a Montpelier artist. "I waited six years for a plot. It seemed like forever." For this sunny Saturday, Hogan enlisted the help of her friend Simon Chausé, and together they dug raised beds in a pattern resembling a sun, with a circle at the middle and rays extending outward to the edge of the plot. "It's fun," Chausé said with enthusiasm. "It's open to any thoughts. Maybe we'll put a birdbath in the middle or a trellis." As the two dug and joked, Hogan listed the vegetables she plans to plant: "Tomatoes, lots of basil, herbs, beans, peas, lots of lettuce, and French breakfast radishes. They're the best radishes in the world."

Talk of serving French breakfast radishes with butter and a chilled rosé drew the interest of Anjali Budreski, who was cultivating an adjacent plot. Budreski, director of Yoga Mountain Center on Main Street in Montpelier, smiled at the perfect day and the prospect of her own garden space. "The last time I had a garden was 10 years ago," she said. "There's not an inch of yard where I

live; it's all concrete. This is so exciting to me. It's my own little piece of land. I feel like I'm contributing to something good in Montpelier, something that's good for the environment and exciting for me." Budreski wasn't yet quite sure what she would plant, but had some ideas. "I'm dreaming about lots of flowers for Yoga Mountain studio, and I'm excited to plant cucumbers for pickles, cherry tomatoes, kale, chard..."

Kris Hammer, who, with his wife Nancy Chickering, coordinates the garden, was thrilled by the number of people out gardening and working. Garden members volunteer for committees to maintain the water supply, compost system, and fence. "Now that we have more people, when we have a work party, we have a serious turnout," he said, before being pulled away by a question about the water pump. A solar electric pump draws water from a 12-foot dug well, which is fed by the nearby Winooski river.

When it began about 10 years ago, the garden had only 20 plots, and a perpetual waiting list of 10 to 15 people, according to Hammer. This year, the garden approached the board of the NBNC, which was "very supportive of the need for more community gardening space," he said. A \$200 grant from the Vermont Community Garden Network (VCGN) helped the garden expand by another 40 plots, which are now all filled, and there's another waiting list. The grant helped finance fencing, rototilling, and compost supplies for the expanded garden. Last year, a \$500 grant from the VCGN helped build a tool shed.

The community garden is a bargain; for a mere \$10, members have access to a 20-square-foot plot for the entire season. At 60 plots, that's a whole lot of beans, tomatoes, sunflowers, and myriad other goodies. The garden is a community of its own: work parties are common, a monthly potluck gives members a chance to meet one another, and a community pumpkin patch will supply about 100 pumpkins for an end-of-season pumpkin carving party. Among the gardeners are students from the alternative program at U-32, and several families of Turkish refugees. "There's a real range," Hammer remarked. "People enjoy gardening together."

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