



[Supply Chain](#)

[NRPA Store](#)

[Career Center](#)

SEARCH

[Home Page](#) > [Publications & Research](#) > [P&R Magazine](#) > [Parks & Recreation::Archives](#) > [March 2006](#) > [Bloom to Grow](#)

- [Home](#)
- [About NRPA](#)
- [Membership](#)
- [Advocacy](#)
- [News](#)
- [Accreditation / Certification](#)
- [Education & Conferences](#)
- [Publications & Research](#)
 - [NRPA Books & Resources](#)
 - [P&R Magazine](#)
 - [NRPA Cybrary](#)
 - [Journal of Leisure Research](#)
 - [Journal of Park and Recreation Admin.](#)
 - [Schole: A Journal of Leisure Studies and Recreation Education](#)
 - [Therapeutic Recreation Journal](#)
 - [Resources](#)
 - [Newsletters](#)
- [Programs & Partnerships](#)
- [Marketing Opportunities](#)
- [Resources](#)
- [Contact Us](#)

Bloom to Grow

Community gardening provides education, enrichment and eggplants all in one plot

By Marti Ross Bjornson

In Evanston, Ill., Tom Richardson grows tomatoes in the 20-foot-by-20-foot plot he has tended for more than 30 years in James Park. In Portland, Ore., Marilee Dea savors sweet peas she picked from her Reed College Community Garden. And in Burlington, Vt., K.K. Wilder harvests produce from an accessible plot at the Ethan Allan homestead.

What these three gardeners have in common with each other, and with tens of thousands of other gardeners around North America, is the extraordinary experience of gardening on community land made available through the auspices of their local park and recreation programs.



They are community gardeners who garden with others, either in assigned "allotment" plots or in common public gardens. Their gardening experience enhances their own quality of life and that of the communities in which they garden. They give back to their communities by growing fresh food and abundant blossoms, by helping maintain the land, and by interacting with fellow citizens.

North America has a long history of community gardening. You may recall in the 1940s, World War II Victory Gardens in which civic duty brought gardeners together to grow food for the war effort. The mid-1970s heralded a revitalized community gardening movement led by urban economic and environmental activists in New York, Chicago, Seattle, Toronto and Philadelphia. The U.S. Department of Agriculture promoted its Urban Gardening Program, and the American Community Gardening Association (ACGA), North America's premier community gardening organization, was founded.

Park and recreation programs joined the movement, dispersed grants and municipal funds, helped organize community gardeners, and provided land to till.

Today, park and recreation programs in large cities and small towns continue to promote community gardens for their residents. They support community gardening because they see it as a broad-reaching, educational, environment-enriching, community-enhancing and cost-effective activity.

In 2002, the Burlington City Council passed a resolution supporting the long-term maintenance and expansion of the Burlington Area Community Gardens program. Then and now, BACG is the city's most popular recreation program. Lisa Coven, land steward of Burlington Parks and Recreation Department, and Jim Flint, executive director of the Friends of Burlington Gardens, are partners in one of North America's pioneer community gardening programs.

Community gardening began in Burlington in 1972 with a partnership between the Burlington Parks Department and the nonprofit Gardens for All, which became the National Gardening Association. Subsequently, the Burlington community garden program became a separate nonprofit, BACG.

By 1996, Friends of Burlington Gardens (FBG), a grassroots nonprofit volunteer organization, formed to support BACG. It promotes community-based gardening throughout Vermont and is spearheading the growth of the Vermont Community Garden Network.

Burlington's program is notable for its sustainability and the extensive support it enjoys. It's also noteworthy that the program, which serves more than 2,000 people, succeeds largely because of the commitment from an extensive network of gardeners, volunteers, institutions and private entities. It thrives because this partnership faces challenges and welcomes support together.

Coven and Flint report, "Community gardens provide many benefits including health and well-being, intergenerational recreation, enhanced food

QUICK LINKS

[Join Us at the NRPA Congress & Exposition](#)

exhibit & sponsorship opportunities

P&R NOW
The blog of P&R magazine

Magic 8 in 2008
CONTRIBUTE TO THE NRPA ANNUAL FUND ... MAKE THIS A GREAT YEAR FOR PARKS & RECREATION

PARKS & RECREATION

security and nutrition, opportunities for education and social development, youth civic engagement, and reduction of neighborhood crime and vandalism.”

By contrast to Burlington’s historic BACG, Sacramento, Calif., only two years ago established a new community gardening program, seeing this “as a way to build community, bring the neighbors together and beautify the neighborhood at the same time.”

Bill Maynard, Sacramento’s first community garden coordinator, explains that although community gardens existed for many years on private land prior to the city’s formal creation of the program, residential and commercial development sounded the death knell for many of them.

Maynard is an ACGA board member and former member of the city’s park and recreation citizens’ advisory committee. He sees real benefits arising from the opportunity to establish a new program. Primary among these is the chance to research, review and learn from others as he develops guidelines, oversees development and promotes the program. Perhaps most challenging is Maynard’s task to identify a nonprofit partner, as Burlington has done. The city envisions that the nonprofit will oversee the community garden program, with the coordinator acting as the liaison to the city.

Maynard says that Sacramento has experienced some opposition to community gardens, largely by people who do not fully understand the fledgling program. Some have complained about “guerilla gardens” that spring up unsponsored on vacant land, are not maintained, and not regulated.

Others question city funding of a community garden program where people directly benefit from the city’s land. Maynard and the city reply that city-sponsored programs address both of these objections, because gardeners get out of their houses and, when gardens are located in parks, they keep their “eyes on the park” and become its stewards. Most proponents of community gardening cite examples of actual reduction in crime in and around parks once community gardens take root, since the gardeners themselves become “eyes and ears” for the park and the adjacent communities.

Such is the case in Seattle, where the Seattle Parks Department has explicitly recognized gardening as a “valid recreational use” of parks department property. The P-Patch community gardening program, which periodically faced some opposition in neighborhoods, now is one of the most popular in the city.



Rich MacDonald, manager of the P-Patch program, in the Department of Neighborhoods, explains that as P-Patch recognition has grown and created more public open space in the gardens, opposition has diminished.

Although “some neighbors believe [gardens] may become unsightly, bring strangers into the neighborhood and cause parking problems, as gardens become more fixed in neighborhoods, they become well liked,” he says.

MacDonald notes that today’s challenges for gardens in parks are the same faced by others, like ball fields, tennis or basketball courts, or off-leash areas. People recognize these as city-wide needs, but at the neighborhood level people may oppose these uses. “Our challenge,” MacDonald explains, “is to turn out ‘wannabe’ gardeners [to express their interest] during the park planning process. In other words, community gardening is not a use that parks [automatically] programs for; rather it responds to neighborhood interest.”

MacDonald observes that education, outreach, and, especially, “developing relationships at various public and private levels has been a major reason for the success of our program.”

Leslie Pohl-Kosbau, director of Portland [Ore.] Community Gardens, is a long-time leader in the community gardening movement and former ACGA board member. She knows the value of community gardening and reports that Portland recognizes that “community gardens provide more than fresh produce—they build friendships and pockets of green in urban neighborhoods.”

She cites the Portland 2020 Plan: “We need to blur the boundaries between park and city. Let’s start thinking of Portland itself as a garden. If we invest our city with the same care, love, attention and patience we extend to our private gardens, Portlanders will be rewarded with stunning beauty, ecological health and spirit of place.”

Still, Portland’s program, like those in other cities, confronts economic challenges and periodically faces proposed major funding cuts. However,

Pohl-Kosbau says that gardening isn't all plants—it is really about people. She says that the beauty of community gardening is that there are no limitations to any segment of any community. "Whether gardens are ADA-accessible or welcome at-risk kids, whether they focus on seniors or school children, they offer opportunities for the physical and social benefit to people and neighborhoods," says Pohl-Kosbau.

Toronto is an enthusiastic host city for a program that demonstrates the power of community gardening to meet broader municipal needs and commitments—in Toronto's case commitments to young people and community food security. The Toronto Community Gardens Program "began with the idea that well-used, clean and safe parks are essential to the health and vitality of urban living," according to Solomon Boyé, community gardens program coordinator and a member of the ACGA Board of Directors.

Two key aspects of Toronto's program are partnership and commitment, which energize and sustain it. In fact, in partnership with Food-Share and the Toronto Food Policy Council, the Toronto program began as a youth training and mentoring project based on horticultural education.

The program sponsors the Junior Gardener Program to teach children about healthy nutrition and physical activity and Toronto Urban Gardening Youth, which uses gardening to build youth entrepreneurial, leadership and "invaluable life skills." The program also encourages its gardeners to grow food for themselves and the community, providing more than 3,000 Toronto residents their own rows to hoe.

Toronto demonstrates a city-wide commitment to community food security, a phrase that describes a community's access to healthy, reasonably priced good food. When communities or neighborhoods within them cannot provide this access, community gardens can help.

Shared produce grown in community gardens is one real benefit that communities understand. In addition to providing food for gardeners, their families and friends, many community gardens contribute produce to food pantries, soup kitchens and institutions. Numerous programs support gardens in low-income communities, especially those where local stores and or farmers markets are not available or convenient.

"[Community gardening] involves gardeners in their own food security and helps them to understand the importance of our food networks," says H. Michael Simmons, adult program specialist for Bloomington (Ind.) Parks and Recreation.

Bloomington Parks and Recreation's program, though not large, offers opportunities for gardeners at two sites. The program recognizes social, recreational and health benefits of community gardening, as well as beautification of parks, increased park usage, reduction of vandalism, and the sharing of food with hungry people through the Plant a Row for the Hungry Project, a food sharing program sponsored by the Garden Writers Association.

Simmons says, "Probably our most significant challenge is [to provide] services for gardeners without [charging or raising plot rental fees]. In order to accomplish this, we rely on an active volunteer recruitment program to obtain volunteers to assist the garden supervisor with maintenance tasks, [to solicit] in-kind donations from community businesses and individuals, and [to obtain] grants."

Budgets vary widely among programs, largely because of the wide diversity of program models. While some programs include all costs of service in their community garden budgets, others identify only those unique to the program, such as coordinator salary and direct expenses, such as tilling, if it is offered. Most programs charge a nominal rental fee to obtain a plot, and expect garden plot rental fees to defray the costs of the program.

While Burlington estimates its annual total cost, including overhead, at

Digging for Resources

To find out more about community gardening, contact one of the organizations or cities mentioned in the article:

[American Community Gardening Association](#)

[Garden Writers Association](#)

[Master Gardeners Program](#)

[Bloomington](#)

[Burlington](#)

[Portland](#)

[Sacramento](#)

[Seattle](#)

[Toronto](#)

\$40,000, the BACG program raises about \$17,000 in revenues each year through plot fees, sales of mulch hay and contributions, with additional funds coming from grants. The city provides administrative, office and staff support and in-kind contributions of equipment and services.

FBG, the nonprofit partner, supports the program with a full-time executive director, part-time seasonal staff, and volunteers. In 2005, it generated \$42,000 in revenues through grants, contributions and special events.

From Sacramento, Maynard notes another point: After the initial cost of construction, community gardens are operated and maintained by the gardeners, unlike standard parks that can cost tens or hundreds of thousands to maintain annually.

Community gardening, though widespread and well-loved throughout North America, still surprises many people, according to Teva Dawson, the horticulture inspector of Des Moines [Iowa] Park and Recreation Department. The seven-year-old Des Moines Community Gardening Coalition supports grass-roots community greening projects, some of which can be found on street corners, community centers, on boulevards and even in vacant lots.

Dawson says, "When I'm out in the community, people are always surprised to learn that this program is run by the city of Des Moines. They can't believe we have a progressive, neighborhood-based program to support their work. What we do does not fit their image of city government."

The greatest benefit to towns from community gardening is that it engages people in community activity from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, cultures and abilities, including older adults, children, and youth, and longtime residents as well as new immigrants. It is unique in providing access for citizens to interact with the community and its leaders.

According to Simmons, "It is a community-building enterprise that contributes to the social cohesion of the community." All this, and beautiful flowers and fresh vegetables, too.

Marti Ross Bjornson is a freelance writer, editor and educator whose work focuses on urban community gardening, community greening, community food security and on the people who do this valuable work.

Editor's note: Betsy Johnson, executive director of the American Community Gardening Association, and Bill Maynard contributed to this article.