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Network seeks to bolster community gardens throughout Vermont

By [Gordon Dritschilo](#) Staff Writer

It was an odd day to talk about gardening.

People walking into the Rutland Free Library for the Vermont Community Garden Network's symposium navigated their way around massive snow piles.

"A lot of folks are probably up on the mountain skiing," said Jim Flint, executive director of the Friends of Burlington Gardens. "We're here thinking about spring."

The Vermont Community Garden Network is an outreach program run by Friends of Burlington Gardens. Flint said the event on Saturday, which drew eight people for the morning session, is part of a series to promote community gardens around the state. The previous symposium, held in Burlington earlier this month, drew a crowd of 50, he said. The next one is Feb. 24 in Springfield.

"That should be a little bigger," he said. "That one's at the Howard Dean Center and we have a cluster of gardeners in Windsor and Windham Counties."

Flint said the network handed out \$10,000 in mini-grants to 48 community garden projects around the state last year. He said the network, which was launched in 2006, has 300 members and hopes to grow to 500 by the end of the year. The gardens range from small school projects to large, town-wide efforts.

Most of the participants on Saturday were representatives of community garden projects, many of which received support from the network. They discussed their operations and offered advice to those looking to start similar projects.

Cyndi Wight of the Rutland Department of Recreation talked about how the city reinvigorated a community garden that had been dormant for several years. She said the city took over the site and cleared away plastic, broken glass, old fencing and even a broken-down wheel barrel.

"There were probably about four or five active users," she said. "Last year, we had 30 users. It's a good start. There's still definitely empty plots, though."

Wight said the city offers plots ranging from 20 feet by 20 feet to 20 feet by 40 feet and is planning to add a community tool shed.

Wendy Savery of Wallingford said she was inspired by a 4-H seminar to start a garden as an educational project at Wallingford Day Care.

"We had 25 participants — a core group of about a dozen kids from first to fifth grade were there every day," she said.

Through the gardening project, the children learned about how food is grown. While the garden did well overall, Savery said they got a late start which affected their yield. She plans to begin earlier this year.

T.J. Norris of Pownal was looking to start a community garden.

"Just last year the town purchased some land with plans of maybe making it where a new town hall would go, when we get money for a town hall," she said. "It's a level space. It's sunny, there's a spring nearby."

The site is also a short walk from the town's preschool.

"I think it's an ideal situation," she said. "The challenges are, how big do we start? How do we get people energized? How big of a plot do you give each person? These are the questions we were talking about."

Flint said the network works with statewide and national organizations to obtain grants and technical assistance for community gardening projects.

"A lot of different groups are interested in supporting local foods," he said. "When we started this effort last year we thought we'd work with 20 gardens around the state. We found more than 40. ... Every single garden that applied for a grant got something."

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