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Article published Jun 14, 2008

Growing trend More locals discover benefits of gardening

By PATRICIA MINICHELLO Herald Staff

Instead of digging out — as many Vermonters armed with shovels and snow blowers recall doing this winter — spring, it seems, is a time for digging in.

Vermonters everywhere, according to industry experts, are getting down on bended knee and tending to their gardens.

Andy Probst, store manager of Garden Time in Rutland, said he has noticed a substantial number of new customers cultivating gardens this year.

"You can tell who they are because of the questions they ask," Probst said, adding that first-time gardeners are usually younger and often looking for certain plants they've heard their parents talk about.

Probst attributed the upturn of first-time gardeners to the high prices of produce at the grocery store and he said the popularity of vegetable gardens has skyrocketed.

"There's a huge increase in vegetable gardening because of the cost of food," Probst said. "People are trying to be more resourceful and definitely get more out of their garden than they have in the past."

This year, Probst said people are growing everything from carrots to cucumbers. In fact, one of the most surprising seeds that are difficult to keep in stock is potato, he said.

"You can't keep enough of those in. We order three times as much and could have ordered five times more than that."

Becky Rizzi, co-owner of Mr. Twitters, said she is also seeing a surge in vegetable gardening this season, coupled with suppliers who are finding it difficult to keep plants in stock.

"Specifically, in addition to flowers, people are interested in vegetables and herbs more than they have been in a while," Rizzi said. "Suppliers are running out of things that we usually wait and hope to sell by July."

At the Rutland Community Garden, Cindi Wight, recreation director of the Rutland Recreation and Parks Department, said this is the first year they are full to capacity.

"All the plots are rented and we continue to get requests from people who want to

rent a plot," Wight said.

For the past three years, the parks department has been organizing the garden, a place in which residents can rent out a 20x25, 20x30 or 20x40 plot for \$25 for the season. Each gardener maintains their own plot and in a year's time, they have first right of refusal on the same plot for next year.

This year 40 plots at the community garden were available and by the first week in June they sold out.

Aside from getting outside to soak up the sun, Wight said growing food for the family has been a big motivator for many people to take up gardening at the community garden.

"Once your garden gets going, you save money," Wight said.

Joe Przypek, a botany teacher at Community College of Vermont, takes his class to the Rutland Community Garden twice a week and believes that teaching students to garden is an important skill to learn.

"It's everything from a better connection to your food supply to your source of fuel for life," Przypek said.

At home Przypek is an avid gardener and grows close to 85 percent of the vegetables he eats during the year.

"It's a big part of my life, that's a good way to put it," Przypek said.

Mayor Christopher Louras and his family have maintained a plot at the community garden for the past three years.

Louras said there is no yard at his house and the community garden is a great spot with "nothing but sun" and "all the water in the world."

Growing carrots, beets, potatoes, peas, Swiss chard, corn, cucumbers and even pumpkins, Louras said the contents of his garden are primarily "greens and roots," and described the Rutland Community Garden as "one of the best-kept secrets and gems that we have in the community."

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