

Living off the land: Community gardening becoming more popular

Roanokers cultivate the benefits of a community garden.

By Matt Chittum – Roanoke Times – July 17, 2009

The boy rode up on a wobbly girls 10-speed bike.

He dragged along a hose to water his garden, a pair of raised beds neatly bordered with stones and filled with beans, tomatoes and leafy greens, and opened the nozzle up to a heavy mist.

Ezekiel Shemezimana is 17, a refugee from Burundi, and he tends this plot to help feed himself and his parents.

"In my country, if you don't have garden, you die," he said Wednesday evening.

A few yards away, Erin Pope, 30, plucked black plum tomatoes from her garden. The vegetarian and her boyfriend wanted to raise their own food and save money.

"It's our first time," she said. "I think it's a good first time."

The stories that go with the plots in the Southeast community garden are as diverse as the crops. With 26 plots, the garden tucked into one of Roanoke's older, working-class neighborhoods has quickly become the flagship of the area's fledgling community garden movement.

Organizers say it's done more than provide food.

The simple act of tilling a vacant lot and inviting neighbors to farm a piece of it has become the seed of fellowship and broader neighborhood involvement.

"It has bound the neighborhood," said Mark Powell, 36, director of the Roanoke Community Garden Association, the nonprofit that operates the garden on 14th Street Southeast.

"People that didn't know one another are now meeting one another," said Laura Padgett, president of the Southeast Action Forum. It's been such a success, the garden association recently won a grant of up to \$36,000 to build an even bigger garden in the Hurt Park neighborhood.

The idea of a community garden is to take a fallow piece of property, divide it into plots and use the shared space and interest to create a social opportunity that bonds a

neighborhood, all while beautifying the area and creating a local food system. Another potential benefit is reduced crime in the area because of increased foot traffic and natural vigilance that come from people traveling to the garden.

The garden association got started about 18 months ago with an eight-plot garden that's still going in Powell's back yard on Highland Avenue Southeast.

Powell met Roanoke landlord Frank Roupas at a harvest festival in the Grandin Road area last fall and told him about the Roanoke Community Garden Association. Roupas offered use of the lot on 14th Street for a dollar a year.

The group hired someone to till the field, marked off 300-square-foot plots and got the word out by knocking on doors and posting fliers.

They added an outside spigot to a rental house on the property and got a couple of hoses. The tenant has a plot of her own, and the group pays the part of her water bill that goes above her regular usage. Shared tools are kept in a storage shed behind the house.

The garden association won a \$1,500 Community Development Block Grant from Roanoke to put a split rail fence around the lot. They spent \$772 and returned the rest, Powell said.

Plots were offered on a first-come, first-served basis for a \$20 annual fee. They went fast.

"There's so many people, I haven't met them all," Powell said.

The gardens must be organic, meaning no pesticides, herbicides or chemical fertilizers.

The gardeners range from retirees and hobbyists to vegetarians and a "raw vegan" who eats no animal products at all and does not cook her food.

The lot is a lush green sea of crops in a quiet setting -- tomatoes, onions, peppers, eggplant, beans, kale, corn, dill.

The plots seem to reflect gardeners' personalities, as well as preferences. One is all tomatoes, another nothing but cabbage. One has neat rows of staked beans, and the next has wild patches of squash.

Smells float by, the rot of compost giving way to the strong scent of basil.

Ezekiel, the teen from Burundi, doesn't know all his fellow gardeners' names, he said, but when he sees them, he knows who goes with each plot.

"Everyone's been really, really friendly," Pope said. People share their crops willingly, she said.

That sharing is part of the social nature of it. "It really builds relationships," said Padgett, whose son plans to build a new shed and sitting area for his Eagle Scout project.

People are saving money, too. Powell said he and his wife cut their food bill to \$20 per week for several months last year.

The garden has also sparked more involvement in the neighborhood.

Padgett said every gardener in Powell's back yard last year has gone on to other neighborhood involvement. One man is head of the neighborhood watch now. Others joined the neighborhood forum.

"We're trying to bring about some positive changes so people want to live in Southeast," Padgett said. "We need people to feel proud of where they live."

Community gardens date to the late 19th century, according to Betsy Johnson of the American Community Gardening Association, but it wasn't until the 1970s that benefits such as community-building and crime reduction were recognized and touted as reasons to create gardens.

In recent years, Johnson said, community gardens have been increasingly driven by governments and agencies.

"Putting a shovel in the ground and planting plants is the easiest part of starting a community garden," she said. But the garden won't be sustainable if it's not born of a desire in the community.

Roanoke's community-driven effort has caught the interest of government.

The garden association recently won a \$22,000 Community Development Block Grant to establish a community garden in the Hurt Park neighborhood, with an option for an additional \$14,000 to buy land if necessary.

Powell said the money will go for a water system, raised beds for the elderly and people with disabilities, tools, fencing and other amenities. The garden also will have a youth element in conjunction with the West End Center and the Virginia Cooperative Extension.

Powell has identified land for a garden in Wasena and is talking with the Vinton Town Council about a garden there, too.

Growing your own food seems catching.

"I can't imagine not having a garden now," Pope said. "I wouldn't ever go to the store and buy a tomato again."

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