



by Jim Flint,
Friends of Burlington Gardens



The ideal of public green space is deeply rooted in local agriculture. With the village greens of Europe in mind, New England colonists created town commons to provide community land for pasturing farm animals. But as manufacturing and retail expanded in villages and cities through the 19th and 20th centuries, food production moved to the outskirts of populated areas, save for the brief Victory Garden period of 1942-1945.

Post-World War II, economic priorities shifted to meet the needs of veterans and their burgeoning families. Small farms and market gardens gave way to tract homes and shopping centers, while interstate highways and refrigerated trucks allowed produce to be delivered to supermarket shelves and freezers nationwide. As commuting distances and work hours increased, processed convenience foods were marketed for modern households too busy to prepare meals from scratch.

The late 1960s and early 1970s back-to-the-land movement captivated a generation disillusioned with the Vietnam War. Young adults casting off materialism were drawn to homesteading and self-sufficiency through publications such as *Mother Earth News* and *Organic Gardening*. Lyman Wood, founder of the Garden Way Company, based in Troy, New York, recognized the trend and in 1971 began planning a national “Gardens for All” initiative. From his Charlotte, Vermont, division he worked with staffers to organize a model nonprofit community garden program in Burlington.

Getting Started

In January 1973, Wood hired Tommy Thompson, a World War II veteran and retired restaurant owner from Ascutney, Vermont, to serve as Gardens for All director. Thompson appealed to public and private land owners to host community garden

Hartland Community Garden, started in Hartland, Vermont, in 2009. Photograph: Jim Flint

Vermont Cultivates Community through GARDENING

sites, recruited neighborhood volunteers for leadership roles, and garnered financial support from local businesses. According to *Vermont Life Magazine*, 10 new community gardens serving 540 households were operational in Burlington in summer 1973. By spring 1974, Gardens for All listed 23.

Thompson looked at the economic challenges of the 1970s—high inflation, rising food and energy costs, unemployment—and saw gardening as a cost-effective way to accomplish several desirable outcomes. As he wrote in “A Proposal for a ‘Gardens for All’ Program in the Greater Burlington Area” in 1973, community gardens could bring together “the elderly and the young, the underprivileged and the privileged, the employed and unemployed, the land owner and the apartment dweller, the able and disabled, and the experienced and inexperienced gardener.”

In 1975, Gardens for All, partnering with University of Vermont Extension on statewide expansion, recruited volunteer site coordinators to oversee new gardens to serve low-income residents. UVM Extension developed a Master Gardener program to provide home and community gardeners with information to successfully grow nutritious vegetables. Sponsors for sites included churches, parks and recreation departments, businesses, civic clubs, colleges, social service agencies, food coops, and utilities.

Although the 1975 Project Vermont Gardens Interim Report noted that 69 new

community gardens resulted, not all survived. Individual gardeners often lacked the group-organizing skills needed. As energy prices declined during the Reagan administration, and industrial agriculture expanded, many low- to moderate-income Vermonters began to regard vegetable gardening as less economically feasible.

By 1992, six community gardens remained Burlington, with fewer than 200 plots. Nevertheless, as the city became more densely developed, residents began to call for conservation, and city officials worked with grassroots community garden organizers to establish new sites. One was Starr Farm Community Garden, founded in 1993 on a two-acre parcel of city-owned pasture overlooking Lake Champlain.

A City of Community Gardens

Today the grassroots spirit has experienced a renewal in Burlington, which maintains the largest community garden system in northern New England. The city-sponsored Burlington Area Community Gardens (BACG) program, administered by Burlington Parks and Recreation since 1987, now oversees more than 400 plots at 11 different sites. The sizes range from the 2,500-square-foot Myrtle Street Avant Community Garden in Burlington’s Old North End to the five-acre Tommy Thompson Community Garden in the Intervale area along the Winooski River.

Collectively, the BACG sites provide 1,600 of Burlington’s 40,000 residents with opportunities to grow fresh, organic vegetables. Gardeners pay an annual registration fee based on plot size and household income. Through a scholarship fund supported by donations from fellow gardeners, limited-income households can apply for assistance to cover up to half of the fee. A Parks and Recreation sponsored “garden-teering” program matches new gardeners with veteran gardeners.

The Community Teaching Garden at Ethan Allen Homestead, directed by Friends of Burlington Gardens (FBG), provides up to 30 beginning gardeners with classes throughout the five-month growing season. A gardener tending a 625-foot-square plot can produce an estimated \$600 to \$1,000 of organic produce each year. Gardeners are encouraged to donate their surplus to the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf to help others.

Technical Assistance

Friends of Burlington Gardens got organized in 2001 to support community-based gardening throughout Vermont. Aided by New England Grassroots Environment Fund and The Windham Foundation, FBG branched out in 2006 to found the Vermont Community Garden Network (VCGN). Through subsequent funding from The Bay and Paul Foundations, Ben & Jerry’s Foundation, Vermont Community Foundation, and Blittersdorf Foundation, FBG has awarded \$50,000 in mini grants during the past three years for infrastructure improvements at 160 community, school, and neighborhood gardens.

As the recent economic downturn and environmental concerns inspire more people to grow food, requests for technical assistance and help in building sustainability have risen dramatically. Friends of Burlington Gardens has refocused its efforts on encouraging the development of school-based community gardens and larger community garden sites. Planned by local steering committees, the gardens provide space for hands-on educational programs that meet the social and developmental needs of underserved groups, including at-risk youths, seniors, and recent immigrants.

VCGN grant programs bring gardeners together to make infrastructure improvements, including water systems, fencing, signage, tool sheds, bulletin boards, topsoil,



Melissa Farr, a student in the Community Teaching Garden program at the Ethan Allen Homestead, Burlington, Vermont. Photograph: Jim Flint

and compost. Growth in VCGN membership (750 members as of October 2009) has facilitated internal mentoring through member participation in statewide and national community and youth garden conferences. Through FBG scholarship assistance, six emerging community garden leaders in Vermont attended the 2007 annual conference of the American Community Gardening Association, touring Boston's community gardens and networking with fellow organizers from across the United States and Canada.

The innate desire for "a place to grow" is evidenced at housing projects, in youth centers, and in neighborhood parks and greenbelts. Garden projects small and large offer diverse constituencies opportunities to work side-by-side, building mutual trust and community. In Burlington's Old North End, the group Grow Team ONE established a culturally diverse community garden in 2007 on a vacant lot. The 7,500-square-foot Archibald Neighborhood Garden, formerly occupied by a used car dealership, was restored to green space by the Visiting Nurse Association, which leases the lot to Grow Team ONE for \$1 a year. The site's raised bed gardens provide productive green space that has led to healthier lifestyles, a decreased reliance on fossil fuels, and a sense of interdependence.

Community garden sustainability relies on identifying and supporting leaders who value the land, agriculture, and collaboration, so the Friends of Burlington Gardens technical assistance program to develop volunteer leadership capacity has been especially valuable.

A Movement Grows

During the 10 years that Thompson catalyzed the community garden movement, he was keenly aware that contemporary pressures and conveniences drew people away from the land and the sense of community that enabled knowledge to be passed to the next generation. He believed that the secret to sustaining community gardens lay in education and youth gardening.

The same holds true for refugees from farming backgrounds. In Burlington, recent immigrants from Somalia, the Congo, and Bhutan have found their way back to agriculture through education programs such as the Visiting Nurse Association's Family Room Garden, which serves dozens of im-



Working in the Community Teaching Garden at the Ethan Allen Homestead. Photograph: Jim Flint

migrant families with young children. In Montpelier, the North Branch Community Garden, expanding from 20 to 60 plots in 2008, provides garden space for a group of Russian-speaking Turkish immigrants.

In 1977 testimony before Congress, Thompson said: "Whenever a governor or mayor endorses a community garden program and offers some financial and material assistance, there is an enthusiastic move by community members to raise their own food; there is also the social change of the people themselves, the involvement of children, and the sense of pride among the community."

Although the fast-paced 1980s and 1990s saw consumption of processed convenience foods increase and many home and community gardens lie fallow, Ver-

monsters of the current decade are once more working together through community and school gardening to restore the ability of residents to produce locally grown food.

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