

Grow Your Own Food—*The Joys of Community Gardening*

"What are we doing today?" Steve Lee hears the same question every Tuesday in Folk's Community Garden. "Today," he answers, "We're weeding that tomato bed."

The volunteers look doubtful. "How do you know what's a weed?" someone asks hesitantly. Lee reassures him, "Everything



Kathryn Sisler and Courtney Matheson harvest carrots from Folk's Community Garden.

Volunteering at an existing garden is a great way to get a feel for the kind of garden you might like to start yourself. Here are some in Wilmington with openings.

Folk's Community Garden

1300 block Princess Street
Communal and individual plots
Steve Lee • stephen.lee@nhcs.net

Castle Street Community Garden

4th & Castle Streets
Communal plots
www.meetup.com/seacc-ilm
Kathryn Sisler • kathryn.sisler@gmail.com
Sisler is also available to advise anyone with an interest in starting a new garden. (908)670-1590

Beach Road Farm Community Garden

222 Heathcliff Road, Monkey Junction area
Individual plots for rent
www.beachroadfarm.com
Julie Congleton (910)409-2336

except the tomatoes is weeds. I'll show you." He shares a trick: "That little fork rake loosens the soil up, too, which makes hand-picking them out easier."

The day's volunteers set to work, picking up speed as they gain confidence. "You stay as long as you want," says Lee. "I'll be here 'til about seven."

By the end of the evening even the beginners can tell a tomato seedling from a weed, and beds are clean and ready for the next planting. "Good job" laughs Lee. "It looks like a different place!"

With increased awareness of the benefits of nutritious, locally-grown fruits and vegetables, more and more people want to be involved in growing their own food. Those who have the space and know-how can garden at home. But many have limitations: no land, no sun, or—for many—no experience growing vegetables. Participating in a community garden offers a solution.

A community garden is a piece of land gardened collectively by a group of people. Some are designated for a single community, such as a school or a development; others invite anyone who wants to participate. The structure can be tailored to the community it serves, and reflects the interests of those who tend it. If the gardeners have an appreciation for organic food, they'll be willing to take the extra time to hand-weed instead of spraying pesticides. Gardens also vary in intent: while many focus on food production, Birch Creek has a centrally-located flower garden for all to enjoy. Hillcrest Community Garden, a SENCFS project, helps schoolkids learn about growing healthful food.

Gardening appeals to all ages. When Buddy Milliken developed Woodsong, a sustainable neighborhood in Shallotte, he included community garden space for residents to grow good food and enjoy shared activities. To his surprise, the first to sign up was a seven-year-old girl; she still participates regularly. It's not unusual for gardeners to bring their children to help at garden work parties; on any given day three generations of people might be pulling weeds, watering, and tending plants together.

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The Castle Street Community Garden yields both vegetables and medicinal herbs. The Echinacea shown here thrives in the sandy soil whether or not soil amendments have been applied. Herbalism classes taught at the Community Action Center next door frequently involve a trip into the garden, to examine plants first-hand.



During a Folk's Community Garden work session Steve Lee positions a bean trellis he fashioned of bamboo, wood and twine. "This is where old Boy Scout skills come in," he volunteers.

photos this article by Valerie Robertson

community gardens

Getting Started

When herbalist Kathryn Sisler was asked to start the community garden on an urban lot on Castle Street, she had a lot of choices to make. A project of the Southeastern Alliance for Community Change (SEACC), whose efforts to strengthen community-building and social justice helped set the tone for the garden's development, it came about when a sympathetic landowner offered access to the vacant lot next to the group's community center. They also agreed to supply water. But questions remained—Who would do the work? Would it be open to the community at large or just neighbors within walking distance? What would they plant? Where would the seeds or starts come from? Would decisions be made by consensus or by committee? How would they use the resulting food? Would each volunteer have an individual plot, or would everyone work the whole garden communally?

Armed with a strong background in herbalism and with community gardening checklists she'd found on the internet, Sisler scheduled an organizational meeting and invited everyone she knew. The volunteers she attracted were of like mind: they would use no pesticides, they would garden the



New to gardening, Heather McLelland and Cedric Turner came to Folk's Community Garden during a designated work session, when organizers could explain the work to be done and suggest tips for making it easier. The prize? A new skill, a sense of accomplishment, and a ripe watermelon to take home!

area communally, and offer the food to the surrounding community.

The result: Castle Street Community Garden. Anyone can come grow vegetables and medicinal herbs. Members keep costs low by seeking donated seeds, manure and building materials and using simple mulches of straw and cardboard. All plots are held communally. Volunteers can work any time, but regularly scheduled work sessions ensure that routine tasks get done and that new gardeners receive any coaching needed.

At first members discussed instituting a sort of point system: those who worked the most hours would receive a corresponding share of the harvest. In practice, it works out for volunteers to just harvest food when it's ready; what they don't take home, they deliver to neighbors. "Over time, those who are here the most are here when food's ready to harvest," says Sisler. "It all works out."

Beach Road Farm Community Garden

The nine-acre Beach Road Farm Community Garden in Monkey Junction

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The Wooster Street Community Garden was started on the site of an empty lot for sale; tilling the soil for new beds turned up a variety of construction debris. Volunteers sorted the debris and made creative use of old bricks, concrete rubble and other finds to edge garden plots and walkways.

Community Garden Resources

North Carolina Cooperative Extension

www.ces.ncsu.edu

"Home Vegetable Gardening," publication #AG-06, is one of numerous useful online guides to gardening.

American Community Gardening Association (ACGA)

www.communitygarden.org

Information on starting gardens, with detailed checklists to help make sure you don't overlook anything important.

Rebel Tomato

www.communitygarden.org/rebeltomato

Hosted by ACGA, this offers fun information on learning to grow your own food.

Food Not Lawns International

www.foodnotlawns.net is the movement's website, moderated by Heather Flores.

Books we like

Food Not Lawns: How to Turn Your Yard into a Garden and Your Neighborhood into a Community, by Heather C. Flores

Food Not Bombs, by Keith McHenry and C.T. Butler.

Carrots Love Tomatoes: Secrets of

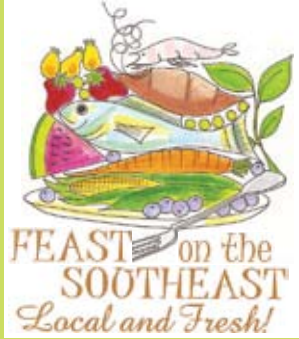
Companion Planting for Successful Gardening, by Louise Riotte. For those who have mastered some basics.

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WWW.FEASTSOUTHEASTNC.ORG

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offers a different experience. Renting one of its 20' x 20' lots at \$12/month offers plenty of room for production. It's a great set-up for those who want to do their own work, although organizer Julie Congleton notes gardeners do like to share information on site. "And people often sign up with a neighbor, to share the responsibility."

Folk's Community Garden

Steve Lee and Kathryn Sisler started Folk's Community Garden, also a project of SEACC, as a school project: a neighbor across the street from New Hanover High School loaned the empty lot, another neighbor provides water. Lee and Sisler developed an interdisciplinary program. Students researched plants, planted and tended the garden during the school year—picking up credit in math, biology and English along the way.



Rain barrels donated to Castle Street Community Garden now provide most of the water required. For a brief time during a work session, they served as a temporary parking place for that day's harvest of kale. Orange Butterfly weed flowers attract butterflies and bees to pollinate plants.

At the end of the school year, the garden was opened to the community. Some opted to rent individual plots, others were interested in the communal experience found at Castle Street, so the garden now offers both options.

Even seasoned gardeners enjoy the opportunity for community gardening.

Veteran gardener Angelika Lacer can garden on a much bigger scale at Folk's than she can at home. "I have the sunshine and the space there, and the camaraderie—that's a big, big piece, too. It's really nice to meet others that are interested in sharing expertise."

And although she now has space at home for her garden, Christina Chiarchiaro continues to help out at Castle Street. She enjoys the community aspect, and helping others learn as she did at the beginning. "What better way to learn than to actually do it and have



somebody overseeing it so you can ask questions along the way." Even though community gardens range from large to small, from private to public, they tend to share some characteristics. One common challenge is keeping momentum. "You start out with a lot of interested people in the beginning, but it's the coming back every day that's difficult to maintain," says Lee. Lacer agrees. "There's a lot of enthusiasm to start with but then the endurance part can be difficult." Gardeners agree, though, that the rewards are worth it. (continued on page 7)

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community gardens

Lacer is looking forward to fall, when leafy greens grow well and cooler temperatures make chores easier. She finds gardening teaches "Patience, and tolerance and a little bit of faith in...whatever. There are so many aspects to it that we don't include in our busy lives anymore, especially young kids. I think when they come across something like nature and interact with it, it really adds an important piece in their life." An occupa-

Garden Essentials

What do you need to get started?

- a piece of land (and permission to use it)
- 6 or more hours of sunshine on at least part of the land
- a source of water
- people to do the gardening
- someone knowledgeable about gardening
- materials: tools (and a safe place to keep them), soil, soil amendments, edging or fencing material, and plants or seeds
- an organizational approach and a plot plan
- system for gardeners to communicate

tional therapist with the school system, she looks forward to introducing her students to the community garden this fall.

Sisler says she is pleasantly surprised by how much support there is for community gardening in the area. "If you have the energy and dedication it will happen." At the Carolina Place-Ardmore Neighborhood Association's July meeting two dozen neighbors showed up, all with garden savvy and all wanting to get involved in community gardening.

For Chiarriero, it's being surrounded with other volunteers, "like-minded people who don't mind getting their hands dirty, like learning about plants, have a general focus on eating healthfully, buying locally."

It's Tuesday, and a new volunteer is eyeing the plot he has just adopted at Folk's Community Garden. "What can I plant?" he wants to know.

"Go to the North Carolina Cooperative Extension Service website: they have a



Veteran gardener Amy Finelli got her first taste of gardening organically when she planted 600 chilies in her plot at Beach Road Farm Community Garden. She plans to make powders to sell to local restaurants. Soccer goal components support the beans.

list and all the planting dates..." Lee starts listing the vegetables, not wanting to send the newcomer away without an answer. "Winter squashes, greens, spinach, almost all of the hardy greens like kale, collards; carrots and radishes. There's a lot of stuff that can go in now."

Community Building Oregon-Style

At first glance, Annie and Chris Donahue live in a typical Eugene, Oregon home: a modest house with a large vegetable garden out back, a compost heap, and a handful of chickens scratching behind the rain barrels. The front yard, brimming with



photos and story by Mary Robertson

This issue's cover shot may look like it hails from an organic truck farm—but it is right out of someone's front yard. Chris (seen here watering) and Annie Donahue plant vegetables in the sidewalk strip in front of their house and encourage neighbors to pick a salad to take home for dinner. Their efforts have expanded to include the alley alongside their house and the 40' by 80' lot across the street, now a bustling community garden that helps connect and feed the neighborhood. See <http://www.eugeneweekly.com/2010/07/15/gardening.html> for more on the Common Ground Garden.

ornamentals and cheerful signs, is inviting in any of the mild seasons. But a closer look shows something more happens here: community.

Annie had been mowing the grass alongside their side fence, facing an alleyway, for years, when she decided to plant food there instead. Now the row holds a dozen towering tomato plants and fifty feet of green beans. A clay flowerpot dispenses plastic produce bags next to a sign inviting neighbors to pick vegetables for dinner on the way home.

On almost any summer evening Annie and Chris can be found out front watering, weeding, and letting folks know that yes, it *is* OK to pick the vegetables. A steady stream of neighbors drive, walk, and cycle home through the quiet streets. They all seem to know Chris and Annie. Those who don't, aren't strangers long. "Sure, come on by. These beans need to be picked!" Annie shows a neighbor boy how to find the ripest beans, then how to check the temperature of her corner compost bin. Another family heads home, hands full, ready to cook dinner.

"We built the street-side garden thinking it would satisfy the neighborhood's need for fresh organic vegetables," says Annie. "What we found is it satisfied our need for neighborhood connection and growing community."

