

# Community garden movement growing like a weed:

Written by Sue Horner Photographed by Mike Davis

*Peek over the fence at some of the community gardens taking root along the Niagara Escarpment...*



Lush green leaves marked the spinach patch beside Chris Hadfield Public School in Milton last year. At least, the patch was lush during first recess. Word spread quickly once children working in the 18-bed community garden had a taste.

"The kids had never picked and eaten something they had grown," says teacher Erin Walsh. "By second recess, word had flown through the school, and the crop was decimated."

That's just one of the benefits of a community garden: Notoriously picky children will eat anything they had a part in growing. Even better, it's local, healthy food.

**A** community garden is one that grows or offers space to grow food to meet the needs of a neighbourhood's residents. Besides tasty spinach, the benefits include reducing climate change, supporting the local economy, and contributing to food banks.

Tending the gardens is also a family-friendly physical activity that promotes community spirit and a connection with nature. Those with green thumbs pass along their knowledge, and rookies gain a sense of accomplishment.

▲ BurlingtonGreen volunteers and sponsors work this Central Park Victory Garden, growing some fresh food for local food banks.

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NIAGARA ESCARPMENT Views

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▲ The front of Beaver Valley Community School in Thornbury has a mural of the Niagara Escarpment by Mark Osborne, at the back of a garden.

Michelle Bennett, co-ordinator of Burlington's Central Park community garden shows visitors one of the thriving garden beds packed with fresh salad greens. ▼

Marigolds glow in the evening near St. George's Anglican Church, Owen Sound. The old tennis court is now home to one of the many gardens in the Community Garden project run by Canadian Mental Health Association of Owen Sound. Tomatoes ripen in raised beds behind. ▶



**'Backyards' in Burlington**

Over a two-year pilot, 168 eager gardeners vied for 29 plots at the Central Park community garden in Burlington. Its success will mean two new gardens in 2014.

The City of Burlington funded the garden in 2011. BurlingtonGreen, a non-profit environmental association, received a provincial grant to operate the garden for the city. Local businesses sponsored garden beds in the communal "victory garden," planted with vegetables that are donated to local food banks.

"We chose Central Park for the pilot because it's already busy with soccer, baseball, a seniors' centre, arena and washrooms, and we get daily visitors," explains Michelle Bennett, co-ordinator of the program.

Central Park is an allotment garden, where the city rents plots to residents. Bennett likens the setup to a complex of backyards, with gardeners chatting and sharing advice about staking tomatoes or dealing with potato beetles.

"There are so many nice stories from the garden," she says. "One woman rented a plot as a birthday present for her 92-year-old grandfather because it gives them something to do together."

**All about community**

For the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) of Owen Sound, "community" sums up the appeal of its garden project.

"When people walk by our gardens, they stop and chat," says Teresa Pearson of the CMHA's Grey-Bruce branch. She co-ordinates CMHA's social recreation program, which offers social interaction to help those diagnosed with mental health disorders gain independence and purpose.

The project began in 2009 in a small vegetable patch,



▲ Children of Chris Hadfield Public School in Milton autographed this sign commemorating the day in May 2012 when the community garden was created.

with its produce supporting a brunch program at the CMHA's drop-in facility. Since then, CMHA has added four more gardens and 63 community garden plots. "Snack gardens" also let passersby pick cherry tomatoes and other goodies from planters.

Employees and clients do the planting, weeding and harvesting. Master gardeners offer advice on rotating crops or dealing with bugs.

"The community garden project means so much to people," says Pearson. "We have hired some of our clients to work in the garden, and this can be the first job they have held."



▲ Gardens ripen in August when schools are out. The Chris Hadfield Public School Garden has Swiss chard, tomatoes, sunflowers and more, ready for picking.

In the back yard of Beaver Valley Community School, a pergola stands ready to support vines planted at the corners. ▼

### Eat local

Greening Niagara believes consuming local food is the most effective action we can take on climate change. Besides requiring less fuel to ship, local produce is less likely to be genetically modified or contaminated with pesticides.

The group received funding from the Ontario Trillium Foundation to provide community gardens and related workshops. In three years, it has started 15 gardens in multiple communities throughout Niagara, including St. Catharines, Thorold and Welland.

“The *Living in Niagara* report helped us determine where to locate the gardens,” explains Jane Hanlon, executive director. “We want them within walking distance of apartments, areas where there are seniors and children, or communities without grocery stores.”

Continued on page 42



Single hollyhocks bloom cheerfully in the Beaver Valley Community School. ▼





▲ At the Owen Sound community garden, master gardeners provide helpful advice, and are acknowledged.

Greening Niagara works with community volunteers to set up the garden, and shares techniques for soil structure, gardening, composting, canning and more.

The Centennial garden in

St. Catharines hosts seasonal work parties to maintain the plots, followed by potluck lunches.

“The bonding is so beneficial, especially to newcomers to Canada,”

At right, Sean James, sustainable gardening columnist for this magazine, discusses the health of plants with visitors to the Central Park garden in Burlington. ▼



Hanlon says. “They may struggle with language but still make connections in the garden.”

#### Learning by doing

Back at Chris Hadfield school, the two-year-old garden has become a living, breathing classroom.

“The school uses the garden to provide hands-on experiences that make math come alive,” Walsh says. “We also use it to talk about ecological footprint, water conservation, local food, composting and more.”

The garden also builds connections within the fast-growing, diverse community. A mix of students and teachers do the planting, watering and weeding, with families helping out over the summer. The school also plants items like karela, a type of bitter melon, that are familiar to diverse cultures.

Meanwhile, the seeds planted at Christopher Hadfield have sprouted in another way: Walsh has moved to a new school, where she’s overseeing the start-up of a second community garden. **NEV**

*Sue Horner is a freelance writer who lives in Oakville and recalls the excitement of planting fast-growing radishes for her two young sons. Her last article for this magazine was “Antiquing: A Treasure Hunt Through Time,” Summer 2009.*

#### Here are some of the other gardens along the Escarpment:

##### HALTON HILLS

Acton Community Garden, Rotary Park, off Elizabeth Street

##### Collingwood

Cook Community Garden, Leslie Drive  
Osler Community Garden, 785847 Grey Road 19

##### FORT ERIE

Sally’s Garden, 255 Gilmore Road;  
another on Dominion Road

##### HAMILTON

Hamilton Community Garden Network, 22 Veevers Drive

Hamilton Sustainable Victory Gardens, 504 Upper Sherman Ave.

West Highland Church (the King’s Garden and the Hamilton Community Garden), 1605 Garth Street

##### MEAFORD

Georgian Bay Secondary School Community Garden, 125 Eliza Street

##### OAKVILLE:

Three community allotment gardens, at Shell Park, Kingsford Gardens and Lyons Lane

##### RIPLEY:

Bruce Botanical Food Garden, 62 Park Street

##### THORNBURY

Beaver Valley Community School Community Garden, 189 Bruce Street

##### WELLAND

Goodwill Niagara on Churchill Street

## What do community gardens grow?

**Burlington** encourages high-yielding beans, spinach, lettuce, zucchini, radishes and kohlrabi.

**CMHA** likes produce that can be frozen, processed or thrown into soups, stews or salsa.

**Greening Niagara’s** favourite item is squash, because it’s nutritional, filling and stores well. It also helps break up the soil for future plantings.

**Chris Hadfield School** appeals to students with fast-growing sunflowers, abundant zucchini and unusual purple carrots. They experiment with tomatoes later turned into ketchup, vegetables made into soup and kale eaten as kale chips.