

Demand growing for the sustainability and fresh produce from community gardens

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Posted: 08/28/2010 01:39:22 AM PDT

Self-sufficiency, neighborhood beautification, reconnecting with the earth, growing good food — there are as many reasons to start a community garden as there are types of vegetables.

In Monterey County, as in many other places, community gardening is on the upswing. Several community gardens have gotten a foothold in the past few years, and another is on the way, a boon to those who want to get their hands in the soil and grow their own tasty treats or beautiful flowers. (See sidebar for information on how to get involved in the area's community gardens.)

In fact, there's been so much demand for plots at the Chinatown Community Garden in Salinas that coordinator Iris Peppard said they're now in the process of redesigning the garden so that there will be more spaces available.

"It's a good problem to have," said Peppard.

Community gardens are basically a shared space where a variety of people take responsibility for a bed or plot, and can plant and maintain their plot as they see fit. Some gardens charge a nominal fee and some don't. Others ask for certain amount of volunteer hours or donations of seeds, tools or building materials.

There are some 5,000 community gardens throughout the United States, some of which are former "Victory Gardens" begun as a self-sufficiency measure during World War II. Many more have started since then, according to the American Community Garden Association, a national advocate for the community gardening movement.

There's been a renewed interest in gardening of late, particularly of edible plants, as people look for ways to stretch their budgets during the economic downturn, while others seek the satisfaction of growing organic, absolutely fresh fruits and vegetables.

Local community gardens are as different from each other as the groups that run them, and their missions are many. At Chinatown Community Garden, part of the Salinas city renewal project in that area, the garden is one way to increase produce consumption and sense of community in a very low-income neighborhood; at Monterey Community Roots Garden, it's the reclamation of a formerly unbeautiful lot and an exercise in sustainability.

At Community Garden of Salinas, established in 2009, the project solved two important problems: what to do with a vacant lot that belongs to St. George's Episcopal Church, and giving apartment dwellers in North Salinas a chance to get back to the earth.

The church launched the Community Garden of Salinas after a neighborhood meeting last year, and 20 beds were installed this past spring, according to garden coordinator Susan Smith. Currently 16 of the beds are being used.

"The time seemed right last year with the economy going south," said Smith, who said the 1.5-acre lot

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is next to the church. Putting it to use as a garden seemed to be a perfect solution in the midst of all the apartment buildings in the area, a way for residents to grow their own healthy food and enjoy the exercise and community benefits of working in a garden. There was also the hope that students from North Salinas High School, which is close by, would get involved.

In Monterey, the Roots Garden got going late last year as a better use of a Monterey city lot that had been a junk heap for many years. The space on Van Buren Street is now well on its way to being a small but attractive meditation and native plant garden, with a few raised beds devoted to vegetables, and fruit trees lining the fences.

"We basically want to make it as sustainable as possible," said Megan Tolbert, one of the driving forces behind the garden, something she's been working on with the city since 2008.

Volunteers cleaned up the trash, installed walking paths and planted everything from drought-resistant shrubs to avocado and apricot trees; currently they're trying to improve deer fencing, since the edibles are now attracting wildlife.

The garden is also devoted to reuse and recycling, with much of the material and tools coming from free sources like Craigslist and Freecycle. Some 40 volunteers give their time to the Roots Garden, with about 10 coming on a regular basis

Just down the street at Monterey Institute of International Studies is another community garden for the use of MIIS students and staff, with a wealth of late-summer vegetables on the vine as well as nodding sunflowers and darting dragonflies. Participants host parties and potlucks here at the picnic tables in the garden, according to volunteer

Tim Wilson, who also helps out at the Roots Garden.

Salinas' Chinatown Community Garden got its start as a job-training program for the homeless through the Service Learning Institute of CSU Monterey Bay, according to coordinator Peppard. That program is over, and now the garden has 40 community gardeners who sign six-month contracts to "adopt" a bed or other space. In addition to the beds, there are also half wine barrels that can be used to grow plants.

Among the gardeners there are students, the homeless, elders from the local Buddhist temple, and others from the neighborhood.

"Chinatown has a lot of complicated problems ... the garden is a neutral space where people can get to know each other," Peppard notes. "We thought it would take a long time to get the beds adopted out, but by this spring, they were all gone."

The garden is being funded through U.S. Department of Agriculture grants, and plans now call for building a gazebo with solar panels, as well as places where people can learn about native plants and the history of the Chinatown area.

All of this garden-building has inspired yet another one to germinate. In Seaside, the group Volunteers Improving Parks (VIP) is now working hard to get a community garden going, and they recently cleared a lot at Lowell and Broadway, according to Kay Cline of Sustainable Seaside.

Three neighbors have agreed to supply water, and donations of planting supplies, building materials and garden expertise are now being sought.

There are a cornucopia of benefits from community

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gardens, both for individuals and the neighborhood, said Peppard.

"It's a way to meet people, with the joy of working with soil and nature, and enjoying the bounty of what nature can provide," she said.

Get down to earth

Here's more information about some of the community gardens in Monterey County. Most of the gardens have space available for those who would like a garden plot, or would like to donate materials or tools to the effort:

- Community Garden of Salinas: Call 449-6709 or visit www.communitygardenofsalinas.org.
- Chinatown Community Garden, Salinas: Stop by 5 Soledad St. Tuesdays through Fridays, 9 a.m.-4 p. m., call 582-4140, or visit www.salinasdcb.org/crp/csymb.html.
- Monterey Community Roots Garden: Work days are the first and third Tuesdays of each month, 5:30-7:30 p.m., through November. The garden is at 593 Van Buren St., Monterey.
- Seaside Community Garden: Volunteers, building materials and planting supplies are needed; contact Norm Yassany at nyassany@aol.com or 601-1286.
- The American Community Garden Association has lots of useful tips on starting and maintaining community gardens; visit www.communitygarden.org.

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