

Just Another Community Garden, Or is It?

Lorraine Ballato, Advanced Master Gardener

Community gardens are fairly common these days. You find them all over the country, especially since the inception of the Garden Writers' Plant-A-Row initiative several years ago. But maybe you'll find this one a bit different. It's officially the Fairfield County (CT) Master Gardener Demonstration Garden but it's so much more than that.

This garden has a lot going for it. It gets a lot of attention because of its location on a main road which is very visible to the hundreds of vehicles which pass it daily. Then there is our deer fence which draws people in to ask about it. The weekly Bethel Farmers' Market is adjacent which attracts many visitors, children in hand (the "demo" part of our name). The kids are great fun to have in the garden and we try to grow things for them like stevia (sweet leaf). The children sample it and learn about something sweet they can grow at home. The homeless shelters also like it for their diabetics.

Each season we try different things. We started growing climbing (Malabar) spinach on a trellis for people who have limited space since it grows vertically. That's another sample we hand out to encourage the public to grow it on their own. The farmers' market features purslane as a salad green, which was growing as a weed in our cold frame. We harvested it for sampling so visitors could taste it before they made a purchase (we think of ourselves as a very mini-Costco!). The 2016 addition of a 3-Sisters garden drew a tremendous amount of interest. Everyone got a history lesson and our recipients got the produce.

In 2017, we added a straw bale garden and a pallet garden (see right), an inspiration from an episode of Joe Lamp'Il's Growing a Greener World: www.growingagreenerworld.com.

Both ideas resonated with our visitors. Everything that's grown in the garden has a purpose. All our flowers are carefully chosen for their pollinating power or to draw specific beneficials. We intersperse alyssum and use it as a border plant to draw syrphid flies, voracious eaters of aphids. The donated peonies which border the garden are there to attract the typhia wasp which feeds on Japanese beetle larvae.





The flowers serve a secondary purpose: they are part of our weekly donations to add color and brighten the table settings of the homeless shelters that get our donations (see left). All of these elements make for rich discussions with the public.

We're always working to improve how we do things for better yield and happier gardeners. To stop the birds from pecking at our tomatoes, we hang red plastic Christmas balls from the tomato cages (see below). Of course we have to move them every week, but it stops the pecking and saves the crop. Visitors with the same problem and loved learning a solution.

Last year we needed to improve insect control for our brassicas and didn't want to use row covers. We're not in the garden on a daily basis and no amount of Bt (*Bacillus thuringiensis*) and hand picking was sufficient to effectively control this pest. We came up with custom sized insect netting (see below) which has kept our brassicas completely free of any pest damage and no gardener has had to do anything except admire how great the crop looks. At harvest time, the netting simply is lifted and then replaced. The netting saves an enormous amount of maintenance time to protect the crop, increases our yield, holds up to fierce summer storms and has generated lots of discussion among our visitors who leave with a handout on how to construct it: BINGO!



Money is always tight. Many local and national vendors have been very generous in supporting this garden: Renee's Garden Seeds has donated annually. Coast of Maine's yearly donation of a full pallet of compost is an invaluable part of the success of our crops as are the countless amendments donated by Espoma. Corona has helped us refurbish our wheelbarrows. Brent and Becky's Bulbs and Color Blends have helped enhance our peony border to make it a real spring traffic stopper, bringing people to our gates.

Deer Defeat's repellent has kept the deer away from our crops. Local hardware stores and garden centers like Stew Leonards and Hollandia, and other suppliers generously donate when asked. In return, we openly tell our visitors about these donations and products so they can replicate what we do in their own gardens and patronize these same suppliers.

And then there is the learning that takes place. Our team consists of Master Gardeners of all levels from interns to seasoned Advanced MGs with well over 1000 hours. The learning is constant. Last year we tried and now continue to use an improved method to combat squash vine borers, formidable opponents: we use a turkey baster to inject the infected stem with Bt to kill the invader (see right). It preserves the stem and allows the plant to recover in record time with little or no impact to the crop. This year, we have learned to remove insect eggs on any vegetable plant with duct tape the same way you would take lint off your clothing with no damage to the foliage: extremely fast and easy (see left) . We also discovered an ingenious way to eliminate the squash bug from non-vining squash by pouring water into the center of the plant: they hate taking



a bath and simply crawl up to be grabbed and drowned in soapy water -- very cool!



In the end, this demo garden is more than the seasonal donation of over 700 pounds of produce. The steaming hot days, working in the rain and cold, and all the challenges we face are nothing compared to the gratitude of the people we see who struggle with hunger. And that's before we even start to measure the sense of accomplishment we gardeners get from working with the public, mentoring interns, and problem solving along the way. Community gardening doesn't even come close to describing the experience.

If you would like to visit our garden, we are located at 67 Stony Hill Rd, Bethel CT 06801 and are open to the public on Saturday mornings when the Farmers' Market is open, 9.30-12.30 p.m. We post regularly to our Face book page which you can follow to see what we do and how we do it: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/349478115442455>.