

Ryan Park Garden, South Norwalk
Master Gardener Outreach Project
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The challenges of a public urban garden are quite different from those of a cultivated home garden. Certain standard obstacles are increased, others are diminished, and some entirely unexpected challenges are introduced--and an urban garden in an economically challenged neighborhood is a different pile of dirt altogether.

Last May, I was searching for an MG outreach program that would provide me with experience--preferably with vegetables--and give me some sense of satisfaction working with my hands. There were legions of people lined up for the various well-tended Bartlett gardens, and I liked the SM&NC vegetable project, but they had a schedule that I couldn't work around. I made a choice not to work in a protected cultivated space where there was already ample support. So, a little bit by default, I chose the Ryan Park garden in South Norwalk. And I really enjoyed working there this season, but I had no idea initially what I was getting into.

Bordered by Day & Raymond streets in South Norwalk, Ryan Park is a two acre site, just a few blocks from the downtown Sono and the police station. The butterfly garden borders the north edge of the park, and the unfinished children's community garden abuts the baseball field on the south side. Here, one regular gardening obstacle is completely removed--due to its urban surroundings, the park has absolutely no deer problem! No woodchucks or chipmunks, either. So hostas and daylilies are off the menu, for once.

One standard gardening challenge is magnified--there is no water on the site. The city of Norwalk is to remedy this, and a pipe has been installed, but still not finished. The act of carrying water immediately transports the carrier back to a previous century. We transport bottles of water each week, and sometimes solicit the stingy wholesale landscaping company across the street for permission to use their spigot (with our hoses).

What survives a summer season without irrigation? Answer: Marigolds, peppers, and morning glories. My biggest success there--morning glories planted from seed, climbing the 20 foot chain-link fence. A nice improvement. Conversely, what does not survive without regular irrigation? Answer: everything else we planted there--annuals and vegetables.

Another standard gardening mainstay is edging for borders. I learned that in an urban park, no border edging is sufficient unless it is a physical barrier--picket fencing or chain link is best. Anything that does not stand up visibly from the ground will be trampled.

An additional challenge in this garden--it's very difficult to engage the local residents to become interested or involved. Many residents here are impoverished and always looking for work. I was asked practically every week, incredulously, "You work here for free?" Most residents there could not contemplate ever having enough, to be able to work for no pay. Many residents near Ryan Park have so little, and are suspicious of outsiders coming to "do them some good," and they are reluctant to show too much interest.

The Peace Corps teaches that no project can be sustained, unless it has community involvement. Well, some community involvement has been achieved, mostly with

church groups, but it is inconsistent. And Green Village Initiative (GVI) in Westport has indicated interest, and discussions have taken place, but little commitment has materialized.

The driving force behind these negotiations is mentor Ganga Duleep, who took Ryan Park from a nearly abandoned city block, because she wanted to see a butterfly garden there, and have something beautiful for the residents to use. The most I have learned on this project has been from Ganga, and the majority of it had little to do with actual gardening. She is quietly ambitious, and thinks big about the projects for Ryan Park. If half the projects don't actually get off the ground, well, then the other half probably made it. If most of our annuals died, then we planted more marigolds, everywhere. Since we have zero funding, we recycled everything into the garden-- newspapers and cardboard for mulch, branches from shrubs to support seedlings, seed gathered from everyone else's gardens to propagate marigolds and morning glories.

In summary, Ryan Park is a great outreach project—it is useful and utilized, a beautiful transformation that has turned an ugly duckling into, well, not a beautiful swan, but perhaps an adolescent swan, all because of the creation of a garden. I have thoroughly enjoyed working and learning there. But the park needs more. Ryan Park needs help in the form of more labor (more MG interns, and local community labor would prove even more helpful). Help in the form of funding or sponsorship, and donation of gardening materials.

I was encouraged there recently when a local resident picked and ate some raspberries—something that most could not be convinced to do. And some children ate the few cherry tomatoes, asking “How come there aren't more?” A question I often asked myself.

Ryan Park, a great place to get your hands dirty.

For a brief article about starting the Ryan Park Garden, see

Norwalk Woman Replaces Drug Dealers with Flowers

<http://www.thedailynorwalk.com/neighbors/norwalk-woman-replaces-drug-dealers-flowers>