

Growing Community Gardens

By Jane Billingham

July 22, 2011



Community gardens: growing vegetables, cultivating communities

As interest in locally produced food increases, community gardens are springing up in Skagit County. If you are looking for a community garden near you, visit <http://anacortescommunitygardens.org/resources/find-a-garden.html>. This wonderful site describes local gardens and lists donors who have made them possible. If you are starting a new community garden, contact Anacortes Community Gardens to be added to the site.

At a community garden, there's always a new person to get to know, gardening tips to try, and bounty to be shared. Community gardens welcome seasoned gardeners, newbie gardeners, and young gardeners-in-the-making.

The Anacortes Kids Garden, created in partnership with the local housing authority and sponsored by the Green Thumb Garden Club, engages kids in growing easy-snacking food such as peas, strawberries, and carrots. At the Anacortes Boys & Girls Club, kids get their hands dirty—and their imaginations sparked—by a food garden run by AmeriCorps volunteers.

Many community gardens provide space for gardeners with physical limitations. Azusa Farm in Mount Vernon has raised beds available for community groups. For ideas on accessibility, visit the Enabling Garden at the Discovery Garden (address in sidebar). You'll find raised beds with space for wheelchairs to draw up to them and sitting ledges along the sides, and a display of ergonomic tools for people with limited motion.

Community gardens offer opportunities for informal and formal learning. The Anacortes Community Gardens put out a newsletter with seasonal growing tips, and the Garden Gate Group (G3) at Hillcrest Christian Fellowship in Mount Vernon organizes gardening workshops. G3 includes church members and neighbors, working together to grow food for Mount Vernon's Friendship House.

Many community gardens provide food for those in need. Produce harvested by students in the Bethany Covenant Church Garden youth program is donated to the Helping Hands Food Bank and Heartprints Food Pantry in Mount Vernon.

At the Garden of Hope North, on Avon-Allen Road, and the Garden of Hope South, on Best Road, the goal is to provide 100,000 pounds of food for four food banks: Neighbors in Need and Heartprints in Mount Vernon, La Conner Sunrise, and Tri-Parish in Burlington. The gardens rely on donated land, donated seeds and plant starts, and volunteer labor. If you love to grow, these are places where you can indulge your delight in nurturing food and help other people at the same time.



Upper left: Garden volunteers cheer as Mayor Dean Maxwell opens the 29th Street Community Garden in Anacortes in 2009. **Photo by Dana Styber.** **Upper right:** Unity Garden is a half-acre vegetable garden for residents of La Casa de San Jose, Villa Santa Maria, Padre Miguel, and Santa Rosa apartments in Mount Vernon. Children help grow food to share with families and friends. **Photo by Sarah Detzer**

Community gardens are not all about work. The Angele Cupples Community Garden, funded by the Imagine Concrete Foundation, plans a gazebo for gardeners to rest in and a memory garden for families with children who have passed away. The memory garden will be a shady retreat created around two chairs donated by a family who lost a son too soon.

Joining a community garden is a great way to get involved with your community and to learn more about growing food both for yourself and for others. Consider renting a plot (on your own or with a friend,) volunteering your time, or starting a garden—no matter how small—to help meet local needs.

The WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners have developed a program—Growing Community Gardens—to assist groups in Skagit County who wish to start their own community gardens. To access this program, visit <http://skagit.wsu.edu/MG/community.htm>.

Here you can find resources on how to start a community garden, ranging from developing the vision for the garden to the details of site selection and garden leadership. You can also access resources in the WSU Extension Master Gardener program on vegetable and fruit growing.

As part of the program, Master Gardeners are developing PowerPoint presentations we can bring to your community. Or you can request a site visit by a Master Gardener to demonstrate particular gardening techniques, answer specific questions, or provide general feedback on your garden.

If you want to know what is happening in the Master Gardeners' vegetable garden, drop by the Discovery Garden on Tuesday morning workdays during the growing season to chat, or visit our Facebook page (address in sidebar) for regular updates from the veggie garden coordinators.

Master Gardeners cannot provide hands-on labor in your community garden, but we can provide resources and advice to help you make it the best it can be.



Andy, 8, tosses a wad of weeds that he pulled from his family's plot Tuesday afternoon at Unity Garden in Mount Vernon. Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald

FREE INFORMATION FOR GROWING COMMUNITY GARDENS

- Growing Community Gardens program: <http://skagit.wsu.edu/MG/community.htm>
- List of Skagit County's Community Gardens: <http://anacortescommunitygardens.org/resources/find-a-garden.html>
- Downloadable fact sheets on managing plant problems, pests, and diseases: <http://pep.wsu.edu/hortsense>
- Archived "Ask the Master Gardener" newspaper articles: <http://skagit.wsu.edu/MG/archive.htm>
- Know & Grow Workshops schedule: <http://skagit.wsu.edu/MG>
- Master Gardener Facebook page <http://facebook.com/skagitmg>
- Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation: <http://www.wwfrf.org>
- Downloadable WSU Extension publications: <http://pubs.wsu.edu>
- Master Gardener Discovery Garden, 16650 State Route 536, Mount Vernon