

Ithaca Community Gardens

<http://ithacacommunitygardens.org>



Hidden Impacts of the Ithaca Community Gardens

Recognizing the limitations, hazards, and shortcomings of the industrial farming system, communities across the US are increasingly seeking out opportunities to reconnect to how and where their food is produced. Global climate change is further reorienting our food production and buying patterns, calling us to relocate in order to diminish our carbon footprints, and increase the resiliency of our local communities.

Healthy local food systems exist as a full spectrum of food producers, from backyard gardens to CSAs, incubator/startup farms and the familiar workhorse farms that supply our local farmers' markets. This mosaic allows people of all experience levels to engage in food production at the level of their own desire, interest, and ability, creating more informed consumers, reducing the amount of food shipped from far-off places, and supporting the local economy.

To recreate this local food economy Ithaca and Tompkins County must have entry points for all members of our community—entry points that are accessible, affordable, and available. For those with access to front and back yards suitable for growing food crops, we need a policy environment that enables and promotes gardening. For those without yards, we need community spaces that provide this access, and as Ithaca fills in, the demand for community gardening space will only become more acute. For everyone in our community, we need educational components to strengthen our gardening knowledge and skill sharing, such as those provided by Cooperative Extension, school gardens, Groundswell, the Ithaca Children's Garden, and the Ithaca Community Gardens, managed by Project Growing Hope.

Perhaps most importantly, we must face the challenges of the 21st century as a community. Community gardens create a badly-needed milieu, grounded in working with natural rhythms, and focused on creating a healthful abundance within a community setting. They provide a common ground for people from diverse backgrounds to interact, and they engender sharing, cooperation and collective knowledge building.

Project Growing Hope, through the Gardens, plays a vital role in connecting broad sections of the community, and laying the foundation for a future Ithaca that is resilient, vibrant and healthy in the face of climate change. With no paid staff, no permanent funding, no secure land tenure, and relying on 1800 plus hours a year in volunteer labor, the Gardens accomplishes much more than simply growing more vegetables locally, we create community from the ground up.

Enhancing the value and impact of other community services

The Gardens provide a no-cost space for local community groups to engage diverse populations in healthy, and constructive outdoor activities, giving them skills useful for an entire lifetime:

- *Challenge Workforce Solutions*: Teaching garden and work skills to adults with developmental disabilities
- *¡CULTURA! Ithaca*: A Latino cultural group working to engage Latinos in the gardens and grow herbs that are traditionally used in Latin cooking but not easily available in Ithaca
- *Dispositional Alternatives Program, Family & Children's Service of Ithaca*: Engaging adjudicated teens in growing food
- *Northern Lights Learning Center*: Teaching homeschooled children gardening

- *Rainbow Healing Center*: A local organization dedicated to cultural arts and healing, using the gardens for applied aspects of their work
- *Unity House*: Teaching gardening to people in recovery, with mental illness, and with developmental disabilities

Fostering healthy community

- ¡CULTURA! Ithaca held a “Brown & Green” Earth Week event at the Gardens in 2016, meant to engage Latinos more in the environmental movement
- Four food donation plots, where over 1000 pounds of food were donated to local food pantries in 2016; providing essential access to local, fresh, organic produce
- Cornell Cooperative Extension returned their compost demonstration site to the Gardens in 2016, and initiated a new community composting program called the “Compost Learning Collaborative”
- A local doctor, trained in herbal medicine, is growing healing herbs to use with her patients
- Space for local groups to lead gardening workshops and educational opportunities
- Mobilization of thousands of hours of volunteer service, often involving group exercises and educational and skill-building opportunities around composting, garden plot care, and other practical gardening aspects
- Functional, beautiful and publicly accessible community space, providing essential benefits including habitat for pollinators and songbirds, open space, and direct contact with nature for all the community, including children and the elderly
- A community herb garden in the southeast corner provides culinary and medicinal herbs for the broader community, with educational sessions and open times for community members to come plant, harvest, and simply learn about different herbs and their properties

Creating opportunities for growth and integration

The Gardens has always been a welcome home to recent refugees from rural areas around the world, particularly from Southeast Asia, and we currently host a thriving community of gardeners from Burma. Beyond simply providing the Karen and Shan communities a place to grow their own vegetables (many traditional varieties of which are otherwise unavailable in Ithaca), the Gardens has become a vital connection for them to other resources in the community. Karen and Shan gardeners meet neighboring gardeners, share resources and tools, and volunteer side-by-side on garden work days, allowing them to improve their language skills and form new connections in their adopted community.

Connections such as these often lead to other opportunities. After several unsuccessful attempts, Groundswell’s farm incubator program was finally able to connect with local Burmese gardeners by reaching out to the Gardens. As a result, several families who have been gardening at the Gardens are now enrolled in the incubator farm program, and developing business plans to grow traditional Burmese vegetables for sale in the underserved Utica market. Beyond enabling recent immigrants to grow traditional vegetables and save money, the Gardens provides a vital link for them to the broader community, and helped them develop business and opportunities which make our entire community a richer place.

Creating a hub for resource, knowledge and experience sharing

Ultimately the Gardens, like other community gardens, is much more than simply a place for 150 households to grow vegetables. Unlike individual backyard gardens, community gardens leverage proximity

to create new opportunities for sharing knowledge, resources, seeds, experience and cultures. Far from simply being a resource for low-income residents, Ithaca Community Gardens gardeners come from all walks of life and every age group—36% of gardener households include seniors over 65, while 55% include children. Gardening background varies, as well, with 37% of plots being run by new gardeners, who are often side-by-side with people who have decades of gardening experience. Human cultures are inseparable from agriculture, and the community aspects of the Gardens foster a rediscovery and sharing of our diverse agricultural heritage, while preserving and disseminating countless heirloom seed varieties through their active use, making the Gardens both a community knowledge hub and a living seed library. The community herb garden further complements this by creating an accessible space for the broader community to learn about culinary and medicinal herbs through hands-on, in-the-ground exposure.

Multiplier effects

The broader benefits of the community garden extend well beyond the 150 plots to include over 130 official gardener share partners, hundreds more informal share partners, dozens of community plot members, and many more who come annually to enjoy the garden as an open space. For 32% of gardeners, produce grown in their plots is shared with five or more people, and 66% of gardeners report sharing their produce with 3 or more people. For 35% of gardeners, over half of the vegetables they consume during the gardening season come from their garden plots, and 63% report that food from their plots forms a “very important” or “essential” part of their diets. Indeed, on less than three acres of land, the Gardens' impact spreads widely throughout the Ithaca community, creating a vital living resource that benefits us all.

Community gardens are local, low impact, and carbon friendly

Despite being separated from the Northside and Fall Creek neighborhoods by Route 13, and being surrounded by industrial land and the lake, 61% of gardeners come from within 10 blocks of the garden, and 76% of gardeners primarily get to the gardens by foot or bike, demonstrating that community gardens are, indeed, incredibly local.

In 2016 the Ithaca Community Gardens celebrated 40 years of service to the Ithaca community

Citations:

2015 Project Growing Hope Member Survey

2013 Project Growing Hope Factsheet