



Getting a Reputation: Matura Community Garden.

Initiative: Matura

Theme: Community Building

Matura is getting a reputation. And it's quite proud of it actually.

"They are the Southland community leading the way in terms of these kinds of initiatives," said Robert Guyton, Environment Southland councillor and columnist for NZ Gardener magazine about Matura. He was writing on his personal blog about the community-led activities that have been making a difference in the town for some time now.

Take the community garden for instance. Barbara Cunningham had the idea to grow vegetables because so many people didn't know how to grow plants. A community garden could help to support struggling families in the community by offering locally grown, fresh and cheap vegetables, she thought. Whilst Barbara had floated the idea several years earlier it was only through the Taskforce revitalisation program that her idea was re-surfaced. Timing is everything!

The seeds of this project were literally planted in spring of 2009 and now in 2012 we have an amazing outstanding and flourishing community garden that not only meets its goal each week during seasonal production but has developed into oh! So much more ☺

Originally the ground used for the garden was donated for use free of charge by local community leader Dave Edwards, and in 2010 the Community Garden successfully submitted funding applications to our local council to purchase the land. The council and local businesses have also donated time, goods and funds to ensure this project continues to grow. These donations have included the purchase and construction of a tunnel house which extends the southern growing season significantly!

Volunteers had to erect a shed very early in the garden's development as they discovered a benefit to the garden they had not envisioned – a cuppa tea shed was needed. "We had never considered the social implications of the garden, that we may in fact get more from it than expected," many of them said at the time. People sharing the same values had come together to strengthen their community and also discovered new friendships in the process.

Now on a Saturday morning any local community member can visit the garden where yet another especially built shed by volunteers houses the vegetables available. A volunteer is always on hand to help you make choices and ensure you have enough for your whole household for the week. In the beginning produce was given away but volunteers soon discovered that no one wants to be viewed as a charity case. These days a gold coin donation is all that is expected.

Not surprisingly the garden is a source of great community pride, and protection. In the early days, vandalism was mentioned as a concern for the garden: that someone would get in and ruin the work. But the volunteers had faith that their work would be respected and not only has the garden experienced very little interference (only one early incident of independent gathering) but it has also grown its own neighbourhood watch group. It would be a brave and challenging move for any unqualified individual to enter the garden and not discover a good number of the community following close behind them demanding to know what they are doing!

So now Barbara is the main spokesperson for a group of approximately 40 volunteers who proudly like you to know they **DO NOT** hold meetings: "If you mention the word meeting the volunteers disappear quickly, so we tend to have morning tea and raise any discussions during that time". And they come up with some pretty good ideas too.

For example, the community garden has worked collaboratively with the local marae and our primary school to form the Green Fingers Club which encourages children to tend and grow their own vegetables. The school garden is also a source of pride and joy to the children who used much of their produce to cook a breakfast earlier in the year for the visiting Prime Minister and his Deputy. The school's extra vegetables are clearly placed in containers at the main entrance for parents to help themselves.

Another good idea came about when it was discovered that the local Meals on Wheels packages were pre-made and frozen in bulk prior to delivery. The garden group thought this was a travesty and set about finding a way to have fresh vegetables on the plate. Now these meals for local residents are made locally, with fresh ingredients from the garden and all within budgets because of the garden. The garden volunteers also made sure that everyone knew how accessible these meals are, especially for residents living alone by ensuring the messages were sent to every channel and that every conversation with locals highlighted that this service was for everyone (even busy professionals). The garden group have also ensured that local Family Worker John Ranstead has access to fresh produce for any family in need. This means such families can receive good quality food immediately rather than having to wait for a Saturday.

2012 has also seen the release of the garden's first calendar which runs from June –July 2013 and includes basic recipes, vegetable availability and key gardening tips. The calendar was sold at the garden and our local butcher and sold out within a month of printing. The group also celebrates the end of produce season with an annual dinner for volunteers and a special outing for the children volunteers.

Through an idea to help self-sufficiency, the garden in Matura has become so much more to the community. The pride associated with the garden is wide-spread and supported by visitors (one of whom recently nominated the group for an award), and even those who are not directly involved with the garden support this project by surveillance. Families are learning new ways to address their

budgeting needs for groceries, building new relationships and learning that they are important and supported by their community. Local residents are learning more about who is in their community, connecting for new ideas and feeling in charge.

The work of these volunteers has been outstanding and when they recently asked for community help to water the garden during summer there was no shortage of new volunteers. The community has willingly donated time and equipment which demonstrates their support to this group. The community garden is a budgeting resource, a teaching facility, a support network and a community meeting point and it has most importantly provided the platform for success, with the message that we can do anything and that we can help ourselves. Whilst many things have been achieved it has only been possible because of the people involved and their resilient and positive attitudes.

The long-term goal has been for every Mataura family to be skilled and active in growing their own vegetables at home but maybe the social family friendly environment provided at the community garden means allotment gardening could be next? We will let you know!

Intent

To assist local people to grow their own vegetables and ease the pressure on local budgets.

Key Learnings

- A passionate and organised person will attract others to join a project! Both this person and the 'joiners' are key to getting things moving and keeping them going.
- Work to the strengths. For example, eliminating negative phrases- such as "You can't do that, xxx tried it and it didn't work, no one will care" and replacing them with "how can we make it happen, aim for the stars land at the moon, of course it can be done: we just have to work out how". Language supports how things are done around here.
- Embrace diversity! Every specialist you need for a project is in your community: you just need to find them (a horticulturist was found very early on in Mataura)
- Food breaks down any social barrier! All ages, backgrounds and cultures working together on a common goal have created new lasting friendships over a cuppa.
- External supporters such as funders, community development and agencies need to only ask one question: What can we do to help? Don't wait to be asked. Notice what is going on and offer.

Key Outcomes

- Healthier and happier families – new connections, new ideas for budgeting, new skills, new friendships. Over 50 families are supported each week and the garden currently involves every member of the community through usage, participation or surveillance
- School Gardening Club- children learning and providing for their own families and sharing with others.
- New local business initiative through Meals on Wheels (previously operated from Gore)
- Community Garden Calendar
- Donations to Women's Refuge and Salvation Army
- An increasingly sustainable community garden that contributes to the wider community in many many ways.

Links

<http://robertguyton.blogspot.co.nz/2011/09/mataura-community-garden.html>

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/southland-times/life-style/gardening/3276771/Mataura-community-gets-together-for-growth>

<http://www.stuff.co.nz/southland-times/life-style/6940468/Mataura-community-fed-by-local-produce>

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