



HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW – THE STORY OF NEW BRIGHTON COMMUNITY GARDENS

WORDS AND IMAGES RACHEL SMITH

There is a secret recipe for bringing people together. It is the passion to follow through on a great idea, mixed with the overarching knowledge that the outcome will always be better if a community works as one.

Located on the edge of Rawhiti Domain, the New Brighton Community Gardens in Christchurch was once the perfectly clipped lawns of a ladies' bowling green. Only the original fence now remains, surrounding a lush and wild organic edible garden.

"It's all about the people," says gardens co-ordinator Catherine O'Neill. "People come here for so many different reasons - everyone entering the gardens feels better for it."

Catherine has a ready smile and hands that have spent decades in the soil. She leads the diverse group of volunteers on the four days of the week that the garden is open, as well as connecting with the local community.

"I want to walk around and make sure everyone is enjoying their day," says Catherine, whose work is as much about creating a welcoming atmosphere. "Did we have a bit of fun? Did we all feel involved?"

The community garden began 11 years ago, under the direction of Sue Cobb who had a vision of what the bowling club could become. It is her design which remains, the concentric curved beds, dissected by wide pathways at 90-degree angles, which are ideal for teaching purposes and crop rotation.

Set up by Sue as a financially viable enterprise complete with a Board of Trustees, the first beds were erected by a core group of volunteers in August 2005. The garden has steadily grown in size over the years, with the addition of a tunnel house, a children's play area and a towering teepee.

The original bowling pavilion has proved essential as a meeting place for the 150 volunteers now actively involved in the gardens day-to-day success. Here they share lunch each day, hold workshops and work on wet days, with over 31,000 volunteer hours completed over the past 12 months.

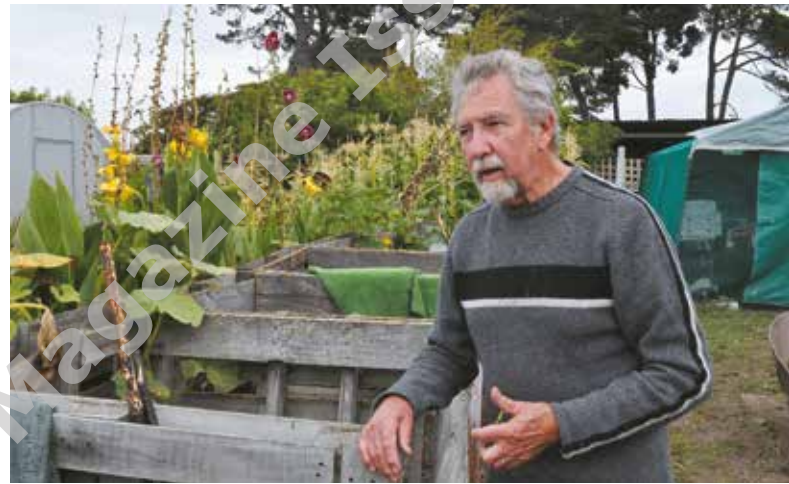
"I want to walk around and make sure everyone is enjoying their day."



OPPOSITE "It's all about the people," says gardens co-ordinator Catherine O'Neill (left), with administrator Joyce Bailey (right), leading the team of dedicated volunteers at the New Brighton Community Gardens.

ABOVE A soapwort plant sits beside their rain-harvested water supply, for washing hands after a hard morning's work.
BELOW Rewards for their labour.





LEFT Lost in the colour and produce of the End of Summer garden, TOP RIGHT International volunteers Roberto Dazzaro and Sandra Gonzalez take home a little colour with their vegetables. PHOTO NEW BRIGHTON COMMUNITY GARDENS. BOTTOM RIGHT Dennis Trower talks over the finer details of converting the huge amount of green waste from the garden, into nutrient-rich compost.

There are no boundaries when it comes to being part of the community garden; men, women and children of all ages and abilities are welcomed. People drop in when it suits – regulars who Catherine will phone if they miss their usual day, and those who fit in a small amount of time around busy lives.

On a sunny Wednesday morning people are scattered around the garden, weeding, watering, and transplanting

Over the past two years they have branched out into education, working with local schools and kindergartens to educate young people on what a garden is all about, and how to grow and eat their own food. ”

young lettuce seedlings - enjoying the peaceful environment and the sense of purpose gained from simple outdoor tasks.

“It’s a place to achieve something,” says Joyce Bailey, administrator for the group. “We allow people to use their own skills.”

The garden is big enough for people to do their own thing or to work with others. Some meet with their friends and talk over world politics as they weed, while others tuck themselves away in a corner of the garden and quietly get to work.

“Everyone is equal here,” says Joyce. “One of the reasons we do so well is the team environment.”

Wander along the smaller pathways and there is a huge variety of vegetables and fruit growing. Apple and pear trees are heavily laden with fruit, and tender new seedlings grow where summer vegetables have been harvested. They follow organic and sustainable growing principles, using simple but effective techniques of companion planting, rainwater harvesting and making their own compost.

Dennis Trower can be found in the compost area of the garden, creating nutrient-rich compost from the huge amount of green waste they produce.

Over the past ten years Dennis has developed a couple of tricks to making great compost. First is to keep it simple. He cuts all the green waste up with a lawnmower so it breaks down quickly, adds a little liquid from the barrels filled with manure and water and seaweed and water, for extra nutrients, and finishes it off with a blanket of grass clippings and an old tarpaulin.

A touch of compost is a key ingredient for the 20 varieties of tomatoes they grow in the garden each summer. Queues start early at their annual open day with gardeners eager to get their hands on rare heirloom varieties, and the huge array of other seedlings for sale.

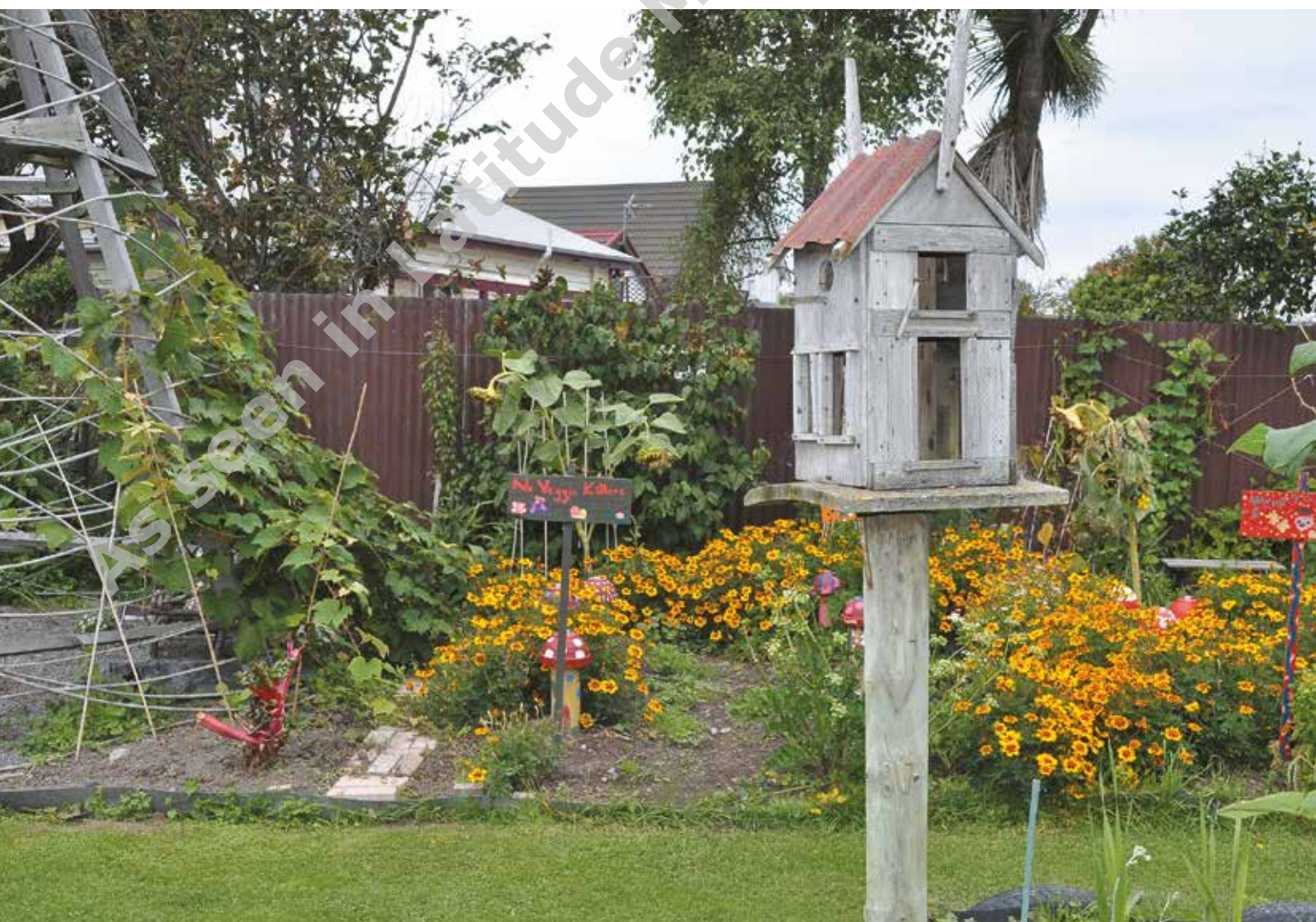
The open day is a time of festivity – to celebrate another year of successful gardening with music, food and activities for children, and to extend a sense of welcome to all who attend. It is also a key fundraiser for general maintenance,

alongside valued sponsorship from Christchurch City Council Strengthening Community Fund, Rata Foundation, The Tindall Foundation and New Zealand Lottery Grants, which allow for paid roles to manage the garden as a whole.

The garden extends far beyond its own walls. Each week they receive visitors from community groups such as gardening clubs, students from after-school and holiday programmes, volunteers from local businesses, and other community garden groups seeking advice.

Over the past two years they have branched out into education, working with local schools and kindergartens to educate young people on what a garden is all about, and how to grow and eat their own food.

Propagating Young Gardeners is a programme they run with the New Zealand Red Cross, offering a different option for students taking part in the zone sports at Rawhiti Domain.



ABOVE Evolving over the years, the gardens are a mix of edible produce, bright flowers and creative elements.



LEFT Sales from seedlings and natural fertilizer help to fund general maintenance of the gardens, with their annual open day hugely popular. ABOVE RIGHT The garden provides room enough for people to do their own thing, or to work alongside others. BOTTOM RIGHT The garden extends far beyond its own walls into the local community, with education on healthy eating all part of their community garden experience. PHOTO NEW BRIGHTON COMMUNITY GARDENS. BELOW A bountiful harvest from this season.



The students are actively involved in the garden – planting, cooking and completing projects such as making worm farms, bird feeders and rain gauges. Exciting new projects are underway for the year ahead, including the development of a fully accessible sensory garden in conjunction with SmileDialNZ.

It is education that has direct health implications, for those who visit the gardens and the volunteers who work there - something which Catherine is very passionate about.

“For those who have worked in the garden today, much of the reward comes from gaining a sense of purpose and belonging, of working together towards something larger than themselves.”

“I like that idea of knowing where my food comes from,” says Catherine, who has been immersed in the growing of organic produce for many years. “I encourage people to have a nibble as they garden.”

The garden is part of the Canterbury Community Gardens Association, of which Catherine is a board member. The association is a support network for 30 community gardens throughout Canterbury, seeing the gardens as social centres that produce food and promote self-sufficiency, and play a vital role in communities by bringing people together and breaking down social isolation.

For those who have worked in the garden today, much of the reward comes from gaining a sense of purpose and belonging, of working together towards something larger than themselves. That and the armful of glistening green zucchini, dark red bunches of beans, fresh salad greens, peaches, corn and kamo kamo, which will feed them over the coming week. ■



ABOVE The garden provides enough room for people to do their own thing, or to work alongside others.

For more information visit www.nbgardens.org.nz

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