

Community n. *Common enjoyment; participation; a body of people having common interests.*



Community food gardening originated as a response to a lack of green space in urban areas but is now reaching out to villages and towns across the country in response to local needs. It brings people together of all ages, abilities and social backgrounds and the physical and mental health benefits from it cannot be underestimated. This is the story of how residents in Goresbridge, County Kilkenny set about it.

Goresbridge Community Garden.... began in 2009 when Kilkenny Leader Partnership were able to fund a polytunnel at the local Rural Development Office (RDO) in the middle of Goresbridge.

Late winter - 2010

In February Breda and Colette from the RDO contacted Dee (at www.greensideup.ie) looking for help to get the garden started - they didn't know where to begin and Kilkenny VEC had offered to pay for 8 weeks of tutoring. Their idea was to create a community garden, provide summer planting in the village and to bring people together.



Initial impressions were that we wouldn't be able to do much outside of the huge polytunnel - there was very little space in the small garden and the shading from the surrounding walls would make growing anything up against them quite a challenge. We were looking at a 5m x 13m back garden full of overgrown grass and weeds.

So where did we begin?

It was important that the group become as involved as possible with the planning and decision making process, and that their suggestions and ideas be included - it was their garden after all. They were also encouraged to keep notes and practice what they learnt in their own gardens.



With just half a dozen volunteers at our first session, we made an assessment of the site, took measurements, did a soil analysis and discussed ideas. Thanks to James and Jane (participants from the outset) a week later we had a plan to work from.

Putting measurements down on paper is really important when starting out.

Looking at overgrown, weedy sites can be very daunting. However, with a blank sheet of paper, various sketches and designs can be played with until the most suitable one is arrived at.

As the polytunnel was such a dominant feature, we decided to concentrate on planting up the odd shaped area outside with as many raised beds as practical. We'd established from the survey that the soil was a dark clayey/sandy mix with a neutral pH, but as the group were only to meet once a week it was important that the garden be low maintenance. (Breda and Colette would have their hands full watering everyday, without extra weeding, strimming or mowing.)



So low maintenance was best achieved by building raised beds (thanks Kevin) and filling in paths with mulch to keep the weeds down.



(Some fabulous carpet off-cuts were donated to place under the mulch which some of us were hankering after for our own hallways!)

Within a couple of weeks of starting up word got around and the number of people coming along on a Wednesday morning increased until we averaged about ten men and women.



At the beginning Dee explained the principles of gardening chemically free and one of the early projects was to build a compost area and install a water butt. Birds were also encouraged into the garden to help keep the snail population at bay and Dee explained the principles of crop rotation and companion planting.

After we'd made our plans we started sowing seeds in earnest. They grew quickly in the tunnel and before long we were able to prick them out, pot them on and once the beds were built, plant out the transplants.

Thanks to generous benefactors, topsoil and very well rotted manure were donated to fill the new beds so we were able to cover the principles of soil preparation, manuring and fertilising.



We've enjoyed our experiments too.... Individual potatoes were planted into bags to see who got the biggest crop and different composts were used for seedlings to see for ourselves which ones worked the best.



On another occasion we rescued a buried rose bush from a pile of weeds and Dee was able to demonstrate techniques for pruning.

The local primary school came to the garden back in April where Colette and Breda, armed with their new found confidence, were able to help the children sow sunflower seeds for their own gardens.

What have we grown?

Within two months of starting the new vegetable garden, outside we have: courgettes, pumpkins, nasturtiums, peas, broad beans, runner beans, carrots, radish, lettuce, swiss chard, spinach, kale, leeks, cabbage, potatoes, swedes, scallions, onions and garlic. We've also planted Brussels sprouts, marigolds and





two apple trees. In the tunnel we have more courgettes, tomatoes, lettuce, basil, peppers, cucumbers, aubergines and melons.

As the weeks have gone by friendships have developed and confidence has grown.

Several group members have been making hanging baskets and planting flowers and vegetables in their own gardens. Valerie, Jane, Dee and Mary have brought in tomato plants and cuttings to share around.

Finousa provided us with more well-rotted manure and weeded and dug until the soil looked like breadcrumbs.

Patrick has enthusiastically taken on any job going and Liam and Josephine have pricked out more seedlings than we could count. James, one of the more experienced gardeners has quietly and patiently helped along some of the novices and Colette - well her enthusiasm and commitment to help her community and friends has swept us all along.

We all look forward to coming to the garden - it takes you away from any worries or stress. And for those two hours each week we experience smiles, fresh air, exercise, stories, learning and laughter.



Hanging Baskets

It's important when you start up a community garden not to be overly ambitious. Gaining confidence in your own abilities is very important and if we'd attempted too much in such a short space of time - either by trying to grow all of the flowers for the village from seed or by buying tiny plugs we may have met with failures and disappointment. For this reason we only started off a couple of varieties of flowers this year for the village scheme - cornflowers and alyssum.



These have been planted out with the sweet peas that Mary has been bringing on.



With only a couple of weeks left of Dee's scheduled time (the VEC extended her funding for another 4 weeks) at the garden we planted up the hanging baskets for the village scheme with colourful petunias, aubrietia and fuchsias taken from modules bought at Hennessey's, the local garden centre.



In just over two months, the garden has been transformed.

Everyone who worked at the garden can be proud of what they've achieved. They were a joy and a pleasure to work with and now, apart from some regular care and attention, we can hopefully look forward to a bumper harvest.

