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Northampton Community Garden: Paradise It Is

Madeleine K. Charney, *University of Massachusetts Amherst*



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Northampton Community Garden: Paradise It Is

Madeleine Charney
Northampton

Gardening is the slowest of the performing arts. - Mac Griswold

Does an American style of gardening exist? And if so, what is it? Located on Burts Pit Road, about a mile from the city center, Northampton Community Garden (NCG) is a mosaic of fecundity infused with ingenuity. Handmade trellises, funky sculptures, and undulating paths offset the neat grid of 20' x 20' plots. "What makes this place so wonderful," says Mimi Teghtsoonian, de facto Chairperson of the Garden Committee, "is that everyone has his or her own picture of what a garden is."

Fresh Start: In late April, Garden Cleanup Weekend provided a living example of how each individual gardener provides a vital role in maintaining NCG. The grounds were abuzz with activity. A local farmer rumbled into the center of the 40-acre site with a truckload of first-cutting mulching hay. While one group gathered around the shed for a training session on operating and maintaining the garden's lawnmowers, another group peered into a box of red wiggler worms to learn about vermicomposting (composting with worms). And everywhere, people surveyed their plots, envisioned their growing season, and cheerfully greeted one another after a long, bitter winter.

Power in Numbers: Not only individuals, friends, and families grow food and flowers and network with like-minded spirits at NCG. Various community groups have taken their place in the garden as well. Among them are the AIDS Care Group, Northampton Cohousing, a family advocacy group called Healthy Families, Western Massachusetts Permaculture Guild, and a demonstration site created by the Western Massachusetts Master Gardeners Association. Related to this effort is a woman who dedicates her entire plot to raising flowers for the Cancer Connection in Florence.

Communication is Key: Bordered by woods, fields, and streams, NCG is truly a wild place. A bulletin board on the side of the tool shed offers a staunch warning to avoid interacting with the bears that occasionally grace the garden with their presence. The board advertises services for local garden designers and rototilling as well as an invitation for all gardeners to attend the monthly Garden Committee meetings.

Go Organic: While there are no fixed rules about organic practices, gardeners are strongly encouraged to abstain from the use of toxic pesticides and herbicides. The quarterly newsletter recently dedicated most of the issue to this theme. It is estimated that the vast majority of gardeners maintain a purely organic approach to raising their food and flowers. Says Teghtsoonian, "We reinforce the idea of improving the soil by continually adding organic matter." To



One of the plotholders at the Northampton Community Gardens works behind a stand of tulips. Photo by Brett Treganowan.

that end, three towers of compost (fresh, in process, finished) rise up from the west end of the site. The first tower sports a , handmade sign directing gardeners to "Pile it up high!"

A Healing Place: Art Larson, a 15-year veteran of NCG, sees the garden as a place of healing. Once the kitchen gardens for the Northampton State Hospital, these very plots were worked by the hospital patients. Larson speculates that the patients likely received positive energy as they worked the land, as do the current gardeners. He is also intrigued with the proximity of the soon-to-be dismantled hospital buildings. "When those two main buildings come down the week of May 10th," he prophesies, "there will be a major release from the suffering that took place there."

Lend a Hand: Each gardener is expected to donate 2 hours of work per one plot, 3 hours for two plots, 4 hours for three plots, and 5 hours for 4 plots. Tasks include: inspecting beds for ragweed in the fall, tidying the tool shed, processing mailings, mowing paths, and assisting with spring registration. Gardeners also pitch in with maintaining a plot for the Northampton Survival Center and delivering the produce it yields. Gardeners who enjoy chatting with their fellow stewards can become Gardening Neighbors. This program matches seasoned gardeners with newcomers, a relationship which often includes watering exchanges and plant swaps as well as sharing useful information.

Satisfaction Guaranteed: Some ruggedly individualistic gardeners balked when the community service requirement was implemented three years ago. Is it worth the effort, they wondered? Most would agree that it is. Larson points to a cluster of emerging lettuce leaves and emphatically states, "There is more vitality in three leaves of this plant than there is in a three-pound bag of mesclun mix from Stop and Shop." Now that's a mouthful!

- Annual fee per plot (Northampton residents) - \$15
- Annual fee per plot (non-resident but work in Northampton) - \$20
- Annual fee per plot (neither work nor live in Northampton) - \$25
- Maximum # of plots permitted per gardener – 4

Plots are still available for this season: (413) 587-1040. You can also visit the NCG website at www.nohogardens.org

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Northeast Organic Farming Association, Massachusetts Chapter
411 Sheldon Road | Barre, MA | 01005 | (978) 355-2853 | nofa@nofamass.org

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