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November / December 2024

FAITH TODAY

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PM 40069336



Faith-based community gardens build trust and skills

Churches and gardens “mutually beneficial” say researchers

By Irene-Grace Bom

“You are closer to God in your garden than anywhere else on earth,” declares a plaque in the garden of Bette Maidment in Kanata, Ont. She’s also a member of Trinity

Presbyterian Church and a strong supporter of the church’s youth project to start a pollinator garden designed to support bees and butterflies.

Maidment’s efforts are in line with a growing number of churches and ministries across Canada creating community gardens.

Community gardening has been growing since the 1970s, including a surge in the economic recession of 2008, according to Seattle author and teacher Christine Sine in *Creating a Faith-Based Community Garden* (a free ebook at GodSpaceLight.com).

The surge over the last dozen years includes a striking number of churches and ministries running such gardens, says Kentucky church planter Bryan K. Langlands in *Cultivating Neighborhood: Identifying Best Practices for Launching a Christ-Centered Community Garden* (Wipf & Stock, 2014).

Langlands calls community gardens acts of radical hospitality by urban churches, acts that

run counter to the pattern of many Christians relocating to suburbs. Church-sponsored community gardens “engage nearby residents in concrete ways *outside of the church building* so that the church can actually become a neighbor to its neighbors.”

While no one has definitively tallied faith-based community gardens in Canada, an MBA study of ten Canadian faith-based community gardens by Karla Winham, NewGround coordinator for Diaconal Ministries Canada, shows the same correlation between community gardens and places of worship.

“Community gardens and faith communities are mutually beneficial,” she concludes. (Her e-book *Gardens Built by Love: Faith-Based Community Gardens* is free from Faith & the Common Good, an interfaith network with many resources for community gardens at FaithCommonGood.org.)

Care for people in need, creation

Community gardens fit with the goals of faith communities to preserve and make responsible use of the natural world, as well as care for people living with financial challenges among us, Winham notes. Gardens can also be a form of out-

reach to build contact with and serve neighbours.

Faith groups often have the ideal assets for such projects, including access to land, water, willing volunteers and potential funding.

Winham began her study after her church, John Calvin Christian Reformed Church in Truro, N.S., began a community vegetable garden. That got her thinking how gardens “get at so many pressing issues, such as environmental stewardship (growing food instead of a parking lot)” and the visibility of Christians in the local community.

To grow, churches have to get outside their own walls, she observes. Community gardens build trust outside on common ground. From there people “might venture into the church kitchen next!”

She urges churches to plan a garden with the community

from the start so it’s not charity, but rather joint, asset-based community development.

Immanuel Christian Reformed Church in Hamilton, Ont., began such a joint project in 2007. The church runs

“It’s great to see the whole process from seed to table. We see how great God is.”

the Athens Street Community Gardens together with Neighbour to Neighbour, a nearby centre focused on alleviating local poverty.

The church provides 35 plots, seeds and plants, and directs activities. Neighbour to Neighbour distributes applications for plots and provides water.

Most of the participants are from the community, plus there are a few church members, explains coordinator Jessica Venema. The church wants the garden to be “a positive influence on our community,” she says.

The garden includes a shaded seating area with some devotional literature and a box for prayer requests, and is open to anyone who wants to enjoy some green space.

Gardens for healing, spiritual growth

Other Christian ministry organizations in Canada are also planting community gardens to supply clients with produce and promote healing, spiritual growth and creation care.

The Woodstock branch of Indwell, a Christian charity offering support housing to people with disabilities, began community gardens to im-

prove food security, help tenants connect with and contribute to broader society, and offer beauty and relaxation, says household administrator Lorna Murray.

Tenants help plant and weed the garden, then harvest and process the kale, broccoli, lettuce and tomatoes. They learn to work together and develop skills – gardening, food handling and even entrepreneurial skills when they sell salsa and jams to supporters, explains Murray.

Yvonne, a tenant (name simplified for privacy), says she spends a half hour a day weeding and enjoys the results. “I enjoy eating God’s food – good garden foods. I swim and I bicycle. I notice on my performance that I’ve been eating good food.”

Fellow tenant Jeff says he likes gardening because it “gives me something to do,” and because, after the work, “I can eat the vegetables.” Another tenant Kimberly adds, “It’s great to see the whole process from seed to table. We see how great God is.”

Gardening meshes perfectly with the goals of Indwell, says Murray. “In the Scriptures gardening symbolizes God’s nurturing us as individuals as we grow into fruitful beings. Our desire [as staff] is to reflect Christ as we care for our tenants and garden.”

Garden work also encourages caring and sharing between tenants, she says, building a safe and welcoming community.

Gardening is nurturing

In Vancouver at the Women & Families Centre of Union



In Woodstock, Ont., Indwell tenants Jeff, Kimberly and Yvonne say they enjoy gardening as well as eating the fresh produce they grow.

Gospel Mission, programs supervisor Amanzi and interim manager Jessica lead a horticultural program for women in recovery. (Mission policy restricts use of staff surnames.)

They agree with Murray that gardening is a nurturing process that fosters inner growth. “Caring for a seedling, plant or garden can mirror recovery and mothering. By nurturing the landscape women can continue in their own healing journeys,” writes Amanzi on UGM.ca.

As the women see the physical progress in their gardens, the plants promote self-care and help the women develop purpose and confidence, says Jessica. The horticulture program often becomes the favourite program of the week.

Bethany Hope Centre is an Ottawa ministry that supports pregnant and parenting youth and their families. It uses gardening to encourage spiritual growth, build skills and supply fresh produce.

“We balance [work] time in the garden with a time of reflection and Christian meditation” based on the Scriptures and art, explains chaplain Wendy Wallis.

“I want our participants to observe God’s eternal power and divine nature, as described in Romans 1:20, as they watch the transformation as each season unfolds.”

Students compost, garden, reduce waste

Toronto District Christian High School in Woodbridge, Ont., includes gardening in its environmental program,



Students in Toronto District Christian High School’s environmental program learn to garden and compost, producing food for school lunches and to donate to a food bank.

which teaches students to live simply, sustainably, and to care for God’s creation. Students compost, garden and care for the 12-acre, partially wooded school property that includes Rainbow Creek.

Adriana Verkaik and Mia Macoretta, Grade 10 students in the program, managed the school compost bins that produce 100 pounds of usable compost a month.

Students apply compost to garden beds to grow herbs, strawberries, shrubs and vegetables. The produce is used for school lunches and donated to a food bank.

Verkaik and Macoretta say they liked the way the class encouraged them to think creatively for projects while

helping the environment at the same time.

“We learn in Genesis 2:15 that we are to care for the earth, and through composting and

“We balance time in the garden with a time of reflection and Christian meditation.”

gardening we are able to do it,” says Verkaik. Macoretta adds that she learned how easy it is to compost. Both say they will “definitely” compost and garden “for the rest of our lives.”

Program director Ben Freeman says that for about one-third of his students everything

about gardening is new. “It’s great to see their excitement at growing plants from seed for the first time.”

He calls it an ongoing journey to help students reduce waste in their lives. Students “are fine with picking up water bottles and trash to clean up our environment, but they don’t always see the connection between that problem and decreasing their consumption.”

Freeman says he loves it when students make that connection.

Ancient skills, growing purposes

Gardens and Christian faith have always been linked. “The garden is the initial core location of God’s presence on Earth . . . and is the link between Earth and heaven, at least at the beginning of human history,” writes theologian Richard Middleton in *A New Heaven and a New Earth* (Baker, 2014). As the humans God assigned to care for the Earth were obedient, the garden “would spread until the entire earthly realm was transformed into a fit habitation for humanity . . . and would thereby also become a fit habitation for God.” Many gardeners working across Canada’s Christian community would agree.

In a variety of community gardens run by Christians, the initial place of God’s encounter with humans is becoming a place to show God’s power and nurture to others – and to inspire youth to help preserve creation. **FI**



Irene-Grace Bom writes and gardens in Mount Elgin, Ont. Learn more about how to start a community garden at FaithCommonGood.org and GodSpaceLight.com.