

Community Gardens in Aurora and Newmarket help York Region Food Network fight the scourge of local hunger



Paul Lubberts peers over the London and Main Community Garden in Newmarket and loves what he sees.

He points to one of the leafy sections of the repurposed Town land and notes admiringly: 'It's tended to by a 90-year-old stroke survivor. She grows her plants together with the others who drop in regularly to tend to all our crops. We have 25 registered gardeners and they come here to grow everything from raspberries to strawberries to string beans, peas, carrots, herbs, and potatoes. We have apple trees that need to be looked after. Most of all, they come here to connect. We also keep the community going over the Winter when we do our planning for Spring planting and crop rotation.'

The York Region Food Network has been coordinating multiple community gardens since 1993, including the Aurora Community Garden on Industrial Parkway South, and the Mulock Community Garden located off Fernbank Road in Newmarket.

Lubberts, an Urban Agricultural Coordinator for York Region, says he feels connected to the local gardeners who grow a rich array of produce and flowers on the plots provided. He also feels connected to local schools who have introduced gardening initiatives as part of their curriculum.

'We want to amplify for the Town what the kids are doing to help. We have a group of students from Denne Elementary School who have committed to help with the garden. We're pleased that the SPHERE program students from Pickering College are designing a drip line system for irrigating our plants more efficiently. We also have a group from Denison Secondary School that is helping our Community Garden through 'Innohive' which is part of the STEM program.

'The school has gained access to a government grant program for high school students. There is an element of technology to the program as the students design and build our garden beds and there is a community service element to it as well in that the garden produce is given to the York Region Food Network so people with food insecurity can have fresh fruit and vegetables. The kids are picking up valuable job experience and resume items, they'll be able to get a letter of reference from us, and, most importantly, they can see the change they make and the positive impact a garden like this has on their community.'

Maria, one of the charming regular gardeners, delivers a beautiful bounty of freshly-picked russet potatoes, green string beans, and dime-sized raspberries to the picnic table at the centre of the garden.

At this garden hub, which is stacked with the fruits and vegetables of the group's labor, Lubberts explains the two kinds of community gardens coordinated by the York Region Food Network.

?We have allotment gardens where individual gardeners are given various sizes of space for use. Demand for this kind of space is great and there is a waiting list. Our wait list has been populated since 2019. The allotment gardens we coordinate are located at our Aurora and Mulock sites. The other kind of community garden we coordinate is what you see here at London and Main. This is the collective garden where everybody comes out and works in the same space together. This kind of arrangement lends itself to cookouts on the grill. Tonight, Jerlena Whitton has made soup from our garden for our community to enjoy.?

Whitton's soup is a symphony for the tastebuds and she describes her cooking process while tending to her boiling pot on the Community Garden's gas stove which is perched on the picnic table.

?The spice is the love that we add to the soup.?

The amiable cook, who thrives on serving in community kitchens, discusses the benefits of her vegetable soup-- the ingredients of which have been grown in the collective garden behind her: ?All your medicines can be found in the garden and in the soups that can be made. It's better than the pharmacy.?

Whitton rhymes off her ingredients lovingly-- starting with ?callaloo?a dark green, leafy Jamaican vegetable?butternut squash, barley, split peas, zucchini, carrots, green beans?are all blended with love and some thyme, oregano, parsley, pepper, ginger, and turmeric.?

?We create nutritious and medicinal soups from our garden for the gardeners and our visitors to enjoy.?

It's my lucky day. I am one of those fortunate visitors who gets to bond with the group of hospitable gardeners and benefits from Jerlena's culinary talents.

A pleasant vibe permeates the regular gardening crew that has gathered for this communal celebration of the early Fall harvest.

I have the audacity to ask Jerlena for a second ceramic mug of soup that the charismatic cook has supplied for our group of ten. While serving me a second helping, Whitton sings the praises and versatility of callaloo.

?It's a Jamaican vegetable that can be made into anything. It grows here, it grows anywhere, and tastes nicer than spinach.?

It does, indeed. The hospitality of the group and their hearty organic soup creates a warm sensation.

As we're walking towards the parking area, Lubberts observes that ?Participating in a community garden is a wellness check for so many.?

?We need to keep bringing people into this kind of welcoming, inclusive place. Here, we see the value of community?it's a place of restoration and regeneration. I see what it means to folks?in so many ways, a garden like this is the soul of the town and the heart of the community.?

It's hard to disagree with Lubbert's assessment of the community garden's numerous attributes. As a sports reporter en route to cover the mighty Central York Panthers at SARC, I'm pre-heated for a cold arena by Jerlena's hearty vegetable soup and the warmth of a soulful group of gardeners who battle local food insecurity through their productive plots at Main and London.

By Jim StewartLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter