



## Community Gardens Grow Communities

by Kent County Master Gardener Cheryl Fisher

Community gardens and container gardens have always been popular, but became even more popular during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Feeding America, the largest hunger-relief organization in the U.S, empty grocery store shelves and mile-long lines at local food banks are evidence of the major disruptions that have occurred in the food supply chain as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has further exacerbated the longstanding challenge of food insecurity across households in the U.S., disrupting access to fresh and nutritious foods at affordable prices for growing urban populations, and has exposed the true fragility of our nation's food system. Feeding



Kent County Master Gardener Cheryl Fisher Photo

### The Lewes community garden.

America estimates that more than 54 million people in the country, including 18 million children, are currently experiencing food insecurity. Using data from a nationally representative

### Community Gardens

Community gardens play a critical role in providing additional food security as well as other important benefits:

- Community gardens can mitigate some of the problems that plague urban areas. They can be a beneficial addition to many communities by increasing the availability of nutritious foods, strengthening community ties, reducing environmental hazards, reducing food miles and creating a more sustainable system.
- Community gardens can help reduce negative environmental impacts by promoting sustainable agriculture, reducing food transportation costs and reducing water runoff.
- Humans, plants and animals can all benefit from urban agriculture since it creates habitats and improves the ecology of the area

### Community Gardens Build Relationships

According to University of Delaware Extension Service, community gardens are places where residents get together and build relationships with each other. They are also places where families, classmates and neighbors share knowledge and learn from one another. Gardens serve as a space to grow food, play and relax. Typically,

sample of U.S. adults, the Urban Institute has indicated that 31 percent of families have had difficulties affording food in addition to other basic needs.

Dover residents are seeing successful community gardens providing benefits to the gardeners, volunteers and the community. There are many community garden initiatives in Delaware and this includes a special project in downtown Dover. Reginald Daniel is the Community Engagement Specialist for the National Council on Agriculture Life and Labor Research Fund, Inc., (NCALL). The Unity Community Garden project is part of a partnership which consists of the Unity Community Garden at Downtown DSU, the Unity Community Garden at Mt. Zion AME Church and the new Unity Community Garden at Capital Park, which is under development. Daniel said the goal of the community gardens is to teach agriculture skills and show people how to grow their own food. "Growing vegetables also teaches life skills like patience and cooperation," he said. "We realize our downtown neighborhoods are surrounded by fast foods and other healthier options are sometimes hard to get to and are more expensive." Daniel said one of the biggest challenges is getting volunteers to labor over the garden. "I know we need to make sure people are aware of the garden and how they can help, so we are planning several events as the gardens prepare for planting." Daniel added that he would like to see Delaware State University's Agriculture Department use the garden as a lab to see how community gardens can thrive.

As a Kent County Master Gardener, Cheryl Fisher led the effort for the Mt. Zion Community Garden which started in 2021. The church had property that was not being used and was ripe for a garden. The church members and communities were all in favor of the garden, and five volunteers were recruited. Rev. Dr. Erika D. Crawford, pastor of Mt. Zion AME Dover and the Connectional (International) President of the AMEC Women In Ministry (AME/WIM), set a goal this year to have a real impact on the community. "Our goal is to go outside the four walls of the church and into our neighborhood. This community garden, which is for everyone, is so important in fulfilling a need for affordable, fresh vegetables in our own neighborhood where sometimes there is a scarcity of healthy, fresh food," she said. Fisher met Riddle from the then Wesley Community Garden and

community gardening offers its participants a source of recreation, education and respite from the busyness of daily life. Community gardens can also serve as an alternate source of income and nutrition for gardeners. Humans, plants and animals can all benefit from urban agriculture since it creates habitats and improves the ecology of the area.

## Community Gardens Have Challenges

Fran Riddle, former garden manager for DSU Downtown, said community gardening has its challenges. "Energizing a critical mass of volunteers who are willing to work in bad garden times (heat, bugs, weeds) and good is a challenge," she said. Riddle said another challenge is determining with the group of volunteers just what the garden should do and how it should grow. Community gardens aren't cut out of a single mold and need to evolve with the desire and needs of their communities. Lastly, Riddle said that "developing a network of partners to provide expertise and funding is essential." Master gardeners can provide expertise in soil and pest management, and other topics, too. For instance, Kent County Master Gardener Kathy Doyle provided expertise in planting a flower path for the garden. The best advice, said Riddle, is to start small and start local. "A nucleus of dedicated community residents is essential, and just as important is to establish a network of partners who can

they formed a partnership where they shared resources and contacts. The first season, Mt. Zion Community Garden



Kent County Cheryl Fisher Photo

harvested tomatoes, zucchini, squash, green peppers, basil, sage and mint. Every Sunday, church and community members helped themselves to fresh vegetables.

The garden team even donated fresh vegetables with homemade zucchini bread to neighborhood churches as an incentive to get them involved and perhaps start their own gardens. One of their biggest problems was sharing the garden with a family of

groundhogs and rabbits. They

were trapped and released in a more suitable habitat, the garden flourished.

Community gardens come in all shapes and sizes. Just ask Rob Pfeiffer who helps manage more than one Wilmington community garden in New Castle County. First, there's the 7th and West Community Garden, which has eleven 3 1/2 x 6 plots, and then there's the Rodney Reservoir Garden which has sixty-three 8x10 plots. The Rodney Reserve Community Garden, which was started by Westside Grows Together, is the largest community garden in the City of Wilmington, with more than 6,100 square feet of growing space. Every year, it produces hundreds of pounds of fresh fruits and vegetables enjoyed by gardeners and shared among neighbors and friends. Perhaps most importantly, the Rodney Reservoir Community Garden has become a place where neighbors can meet and get to know each other while doing something they love.

Each garden has its own benefits and challenges. "All gardens are of course, about growing food, but they are more about bringing people together," said Pfeiffer. The 7<sup>th</sup> and West Community Garden, which was started by Laura Semmelroth of Wilmington Alliance, was built in the middle of a busy neighborhood to show residents how to grow vegetables as well as provide a meeting place. There are many events held there

provide expertise and resources that elevate the garden's profile and give it credibility."

## Questions

To find out more about the community gardens mentioned in this article:

Unity Community Gardens at Downtown DSU and Mt Zion AME Church  
<https://ncall.org/restoring-central-dover/>

Lewes Community Garden  
<https://www.lewescommunitygarden.org/>

New Castle Community Garden, 7th and West Community Garden  
[https://www.wilmingtonalliance.org/\\_files/ugd/0bcda2\\_5addfe7cbf684fd9abc892dbcde785a9.pdf](https://www.wilmingtonalliance.org/_files/ugd/0bcda2_5addfe7cbf684fd9abc892dbcde785a9.pdf)

Rodney Réservoir Community Garden  
<https://www.westsidegrows.org/parks-gardens>

## Sources and Resources

Feeding America Covid Impact on Food Security - <https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/public-health-now/news/role-community-gardens-during-covid-19-pandemic>

Greenleaf Community Garden Benefits - <https://greenleafcommunities.org/the-many-benefits-of-community-gardens/>

including a drum circle, photography exhibit and free music concerts. The Rodney Reservoir was built on a vacant reservoir and acts as an open space for people to grow their own food and share produce with others as well as food banks. “During the COVID, some of the food banks accepted the fresh produce to help feed so many people in need,” said Pfeiffer. He faces the same challenges as other gardens – keeping the gardens free of weeds, pests and animals. And making sure the gardeners keep up with weeding, watering and harvesting.

Perrin Smith is one of the 13 founding members of the Lewes Community Garden in Sussex County. Perrin, who is the outgoing chairperson, said the garden, located near the Great Marsh Park, is starting its fourth growing season. The goal of the garden is to build and sustain an organized community garden that is accessible to people with all abilities and for all ages. “The biggest benefits are bringing people together to learn from one another,” said Smith. Organic produce from the garden goes to local food banks. Smith added that it also has its challenges. “We are shifting from relying on pesticides to grow vegetables and moving towards a more holistic approach where we focus on the prevention of pests and diseases.” The Lewes Community Garden rents raised beds but there is currently a waiting list for those sought-after garden plots.

Many community gardens also include an educational component where they invite master gardeners and other specialists to teach gardeners on a variety of gardening topics—including special programs for children. If you can’t support a community garden, but you are already an avid gardener, try planting an extra row of vegetables, peppers or tomatoes! The Delaware Food Bank and other non-profit organizations are always in need of fresh, healthy foods.

## Delaware Cooperative Extension



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University of Delaware Extension  
Benefits of Gardening - [https://www.udel.edu/content/dam/udelimages/canr/pdfs/extension/environmental-stewardship/Northern\\_Delaware\\_Community\\_Garden\\_Toolkit\\_2021.pdf](https://www.udel.edu/content/dam/udelimages/canr/pdfs/extension/environmental-stewardship/Northern_Delaware_Community_Garden_Toolkit_2021.pdf)

Delaware Urban Farm and Food Coalition



For more information about Master Gardener workshops, garden helplines, presentations, becoming a Master Gardener Volunteer, or other activities, please visit these websites.

UD Website - <https://www.udel.edu/academics/colleges/canr/cooperative-extension/environmental-stewardship/master-gardeners/>

DSU Website - <https://cast.desu.edu/cooperative-extension/agriculture-natural-resources/delaware-master-gardeners>