



Radishes

GROWING HEALTHIER WITH COMMUNITY GARDENS

By: Lorraine Payette

“Inch by inch, row by row, I’m gonna make this garden grow...” **Pete Seeger**

Nothing tastes better than a fresh picked tomato, or corn ripped from the stalk, husked and plopped right into boiling water. Spring is firmly here, and many have turned the soil to plant gardens. Seed catalogues have come in for months, promising all sorts of delectable goodies for both the plate and the eye – so the eager beavers got out the proper tools, found some fertile ground and spent a few hours out in the sun and good clean air creating masterpieces both beautiful and functional.

Perhaps the best way to ensure food security is to grow your own. However, some people feel that they can never have that opportunity. Living in apartments or renting a small room somewhere, there just isn’t a yard available to garden in. Some may live in town on a lot with no more than a few feet of poor soil and little or no grass. Others may have soil, but it is in such bad shape that even the weeds seem to run from it in a panic.

However big the apparent obstacle, anyone can grow food. You don’t need a huge fenced plot in your backyard with ordered rows and cute little tags telling you what each of a thousand plants are. You can work with containers or strips, create raised beds in small spaces to do square foot gardening, and in many communities, you can participate in community gardens.

The Gananoque Food Access Network (GFAN) thought well ahead about turning the soil and creating rich gardens full of healthy food for everyone to enjoy. One of many such projects in Leeds and Grenville, GFAN has a mission to see everyone fed and secure in Gananoque.

“The purpose of the Gananoque Food Access Network is to support our community, to provide access to healthy food and skills, to choose, prepare, eat, grow and store whatever possible locally grown and processed foods,” said Joanne Merkle of GFAN. “We have volunteers that represent

the whole area far and wide – really wonderful volunteers that help with the Gananoque Food Access Network.”

Last summer, they tried their first community garden. While far from being an overwhelming success, it became an excellent teaching tool, allowing the committee to learn what else would be needed to make this project work in Gananoque. They had been given an area of soil which, while flat and basically tilled, consisted of heavy clay divided into beds by mulched paths. Unfortunately, this proved to be far from a prime growing area, so amendments needed to be made.

Studying the area showed that they needed richer soil in raised beds which would be large enough to grow a meaningful amount of food. They would also require a good water source and dedicated people. This would require grant dollars, donations and cooperation on a grand scale. Turning to the community, they found a lot of enthusiasm, with local businesses and council willing to step in and help in many ways.

The Town had already donated the land, helped with organization, procured wood chip mulch, etc., to get the project up and

moving. Then, after applying for a grant, it also gave them \$5,000 to help pay for their costs.

“When we received the money, we knew we wanted to buy locally,” said Merkley. “This is all about Gananoque and area, so we approached local businesses, hoping for the best.”

Home Hardware Gananoque was also more than willing to participate. Careful study had told GFAN that twenty 10' x 10' raised plots, one-foot deep, would be most economically feasible for them, minimizing the cost of lumber to frame the beds, yet providing enough space to grow something that matters. Not only did Home Hardware donate all of the lumber for the frames (about \$1,300 - \$1,500 worth of materials), but they also assembled and installed them. In addition, they have adopted a garden and plan to donate all of their produce to the Gananoque Food Bank.

Westgate Landscape Supplies (of Gananoque) helped them with their soil requirements, providing a quality product and delivering it to the plots at a reasonable rate, then installed and levelled it in the beds. As more people and organizations became aware, more and more were willing to pitch in and help.

“Everywhere we went in the community, when we asked for help, it seems that they just wanted to give,” said Merkley. “We’re really, really thankful, because we want this to be a successful initiative.”

“Healthy food contributes to physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing,” said Food Corps regarding the Lanark, Leeds and Grenville Food Charter. “Food is a basic human right and all should have the means to obtain healthy food and safe water. The food system includes everything from growing food, to processing, storing, preparing, transporting, selling, buying, and eating food. From producers to eaters – we’re all part of the food system”.

Community gardens are springing up throughout the area. Currently they can be found at the Butler Creek Community Garden in Brockville; Rideau Lakes Community of Gardens Project including Delta, Elgin, Portland, Seeley’s Bay, Westport, Gananoque and Athens; A Community in Bloom in Mallorytown; the Giving Garden in Mountain; the Cardinal Community Garden in Cardinal and the Athens Community Garden in Athens. Each has its own rules and regulations, but all are intent on keeping people fed and the food chain secure. **LH**



EDITOR’S NOTE: To get involved or to learn more, please contact your local community garden or e-mail the Rideau Lakes Community of Gardens Project at kearl@crhc.on.ca.