

PROFILES OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN NEIGHBOURHOOD RENEWAL CORPORATIONS

Brandon Neighbourhood Renewal Corporation (BNRC)

www.bnrc.ca

COMMUNITY GARDENS: IT'S NOT ALL ABOUT THE CARROTS!

The purpose of most NRC's is long-term, systemic change towards healthier, sustainable, and equitable communities. Gardening fits this purpose in many ways, and can be particularly rewarding for a newer community-led organization. Gardening is a relatively feasible activity that is visually appealing to neighbours and offers concrete benefit to the community, and is also a great way to grow relationships, gain trust, and build rapport in neighbourhoods. It can bring people of different ages, ethnic backgrounds, and capacities together to learn and work together where everyone is on a level playing field once their fingers are all in the dirt. Gardening can also provide a tangible benefit in food cost savings and health improvements for gardeners and organizations.

Getting Started

Start small, with who and what you have. While Brandon's community gardens have evolved to generate immense social, health, and food-security rewards in Manitoba's second largest city, they grew "organically" from very humble roots over 15 years ago with a single plot and a committed group of gardeners. BNRC's involvement came later in the process as an opportunity arose to act as a facilitator and convener of the different stakeholders involved in community gardening, and over time BNRC expanded its role to take on administrative responsi-

bilities for the Brandon Community Gardening Network - a wide and diverse network that plans and manages all the community gardens in Brandon.

When starting a community garden program, BNRC's Community Development Coordinator Ryan Graves' recommends starting small, building on existing interest and community gardening activities, watching for opportunities to expand, looking for good locations and building gardens that people can easily access. When you create a public, outdoor space that is inviting and beautiful, especially under the direction of community people, engagement will happen naturally.

Partnerships

In 1995, the first garden in Brandon was truly at the 'grassroots', as it began with a group of interested gardeners who built the six plots, gardened together, and shared the harvest communally. In 2000, Samaritan House started gardening for the sake of food security for low-income residents and then in 2007 Healthy Brandon became interested in gardening as a chronic disease prevention strategy. BNRC has taken a facilitator or catalyst role, connecting these groups and many others, as well as helping stakeholders with different goals and purposes focus on the gardeners and the overall benefits that come from gardening in the community.

BNRC's role was very important in building a common vision among the different stakeholders. It is natural that different groups will pursue gardening for different reasons, and they might not always see eye-to-eye when pursuing partnerships or collaborative planning. In Brandon, there had been earlier version of the gardening network that did not succeed due to divergent opinions over the purpose and focus of the network and who was, or should be the key stakeholder providing leadership.

With the administrative help of BNRC, the Network was able to develop innovative partnerships and avoided miscommunications by focussing on the broader vision around the larger list of benefits that community gardening can provide for communities, and particularly by focusing on the needs and motivations of gardeners themselves. Taking the administrative burden off of a planning and decision-making network can ease tensions and free up time and energy to focus on a common purpose, strengthening programs and partnerships, and increasing the engagement of the gardeners themselves.

Finding the Resources – Money and Land

It does require money and other resources to grow a community garden program, but over the years both the public and private sectors have been willing to provide funding, with grants and donations coming from diverse sources such as the City of Brandon, Wal-mart's Evergreen Foundation and Neighbourhoods Alive! - Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. Ryan stresses the importance of being creative with partnerships and funders, because donations of materials and labour are just as valuable – local hardware stores, service clubs and even big-box stores like Canadian Tire may be willing to contribute in order to get gardens started.

Location matters, as you need to be close to those you are looking to engage. When a new garden is planned in Brandon, determining the target population and identifying key objectives are usually the first priorities, and then finding space where those people can easily get to the garden regularly. For Brandon, positive relationships with the City and

School Division have enabled secure land-use agreements on city or school properties. Having the City as a member of the Brandon Community Garden Network has led to the inclusion of gardens as part of the city-wide plan. This positive relationship has grown over time and with patience, and there is little threat that the City will seek another use for the properties or sell them any time soon. The relationship with the school division is also good, but less secure with land-use agreements ranging from 3 – 5 years, with some conditions. However, by including students and teachers in the gardens as an educational opportunity, the benefit to the school division is strong enough to secure informal tenure at those locations. Currently, all of the gardens in the Brandon Community Gardening Network are located on either community centre, school, or city properties.

It is also necessary to ensure the quality of the land and the inclusion of experienced gardeners, although those skills likely already exist in your community even if you do not have them. In some cases, the land you'll find will be unsuitable for in-ground gardening – perhaps it is a paved surface or has contaminated soil. However, there are ways around this by using above-ground and container gardening, as long as you make sure to seal the plots from the bottom-up with landscaping fabric at minimum. Setting up gardens is where technical expertise comes in – but fortunately there are lots of resources available. Ryan will be the first to tell you that she's no expert green thumb, despite her involvement in the Brandon Community Garden Network! So, talk to the gardeners themselves, check out the vast literature available or look online to learn about some of the solutions to challenges like toxic or unsuitable soil, finding cheap materials, or building raised garden beds to create access for those with less mobility.

There are always issues using public space. Theft and vandalism is a concern shared by most groups that maintain community gardens. Ryan has a few tips to avoid this problem. First, inform your gardeners about these risks, make sure all the gardeners know each other. You can also encourage gardeners to personalize their plots with names and signs, so people passing by know they belong to individuals. Finally, take this problem as a potential learning and engagement opportunity. Offer produce to curious

people, and talk to people about what community gardening is and invite them to get involved in gardening or food related programming.

Gardening in Brandon Today

Today, there are 12 gardens with 600 garden plots, in addition to an 88 plot urban farm (summer 2013). Alongside the gardens, there are workshops offered that build capacity in the gardeners and the general public around gardening, food preservation and security, and active living through gardening. Partnerships with daycares and schools have kids learning-through-doing in their own garden plots. And over the years, many low-income people have saved money on their food costs, learned about food security, and gained access to nutritious food as many of the gardens donate food to the Brandon food bank. But, Ryan always remembers the slow growth to this success, the steep learning curve on the part of many involved, and careful attention to often divergent interests of the various partners.

For more information on the Brandon Community Garden Network, go to <http://www.brandoninbloom.ca/resources/community-gardens>.

10 Benefits of Community Gardening:

- 1. Health Gains**
- 2. Educational Opportunities**
- 3. Economic Benefits**
- 4. Environmental Benefits**
- 5. Cultural Opportunities**
- 6. Community Building**
- 7. Youth Engagement**
- 8. Crime Prevention**
- 9. Urban Improvements**
- 10. Strengthened Governance**

Developed by the Nova Scotia Environmental Network, find the full pdf with more details at:

<http://www.nsen.ca/documents/Community%20Gardens%20-%20The%20Benefits.pdf>

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