



Gideon Dixon is a community garden committee member and also rented a bed to grow vegetables and flowers.

FINDING COMMUNITY IN THE GARDEN

Newcastle-area
gardeners
congregate, take
advantage of
community garden's
ease, growing
conditions

By Christina Schmidt

Anyone visiting the east side of Newcastle's Weston County Senior Center in March 2009 would have seen an abandoned lot with trash, chunks of concrete, and evidence of its former life as an elementary school playground.

Weeds had taken over and the half-dozen trees and shrubs planted years ago were mostly stumps after being mercilessly devoured by local deer; however, those returning in September would have strolled amongst 7-foot tall sunflowers, waded through a jungle of pumpkin vines, and munched on abundant tomatoes, peppers, and squash.

With a little imagination and planning, this former eyesore became the ideal place to start a community garden!

The Weston County Senior Center Board voted in April 2009 to allow a community garden to be built on the 1.75-acre lot under the guidance of a locally formed garden committee. The

The concept of a community garden allowed the Weston County Senior Center to expand the original idea of a garden for seniors and make the space available for all residents to use and enjoy.



The empty lot at the Weston County Senior Center offered a blank slate on which to begin gardening in spring 2009.



The rows of raised beds are placed 10 feet apart to allow easy access and for mowing. Faucets were strategically placed so gardeners do not have to move hoses more than a few feet for watering.

senior center had been relocated in 2003 from a downtown building to the vacated Gertrude Burns Elementary School. While extensive renovations had been made to the building, the lot and accompanying greenhouse had escaped attention. From the beginning, the center had wanted to include a garden area but other construction projects took precedence.

The concept of a community garden allowed the center to expand the original idea of a garden for seniors and make the space available for all local residents to use and enjoy. The center contributed some money for initial construction projects, and additional funding for the garden came from the City of Newcastle, Weston County, and the Weston County Natural Resource District.

Like community gardens everywhere, it serves as a place of meeting and activity for residents of all ages and abilities and a place where any gardener can produce his or her own fresh, local produce. Although community gardens got their start in big cities where gardening space is scarce, rural landowners might find much to learn from the techniques used and enjoy the sense of community in working on a project with others.

Raised Beds Offer Many Advantages

Weston County's community garden has 44 raised beds of varying sizes for rent. Prices range from \$5 to \$20 for the season, and the fees are reinvested in the garden. Raised beds offer several advantages, including easy assignment of plots and ease of maintenance for gardeners. The beds are 12 inches high, made of 4-inch x 4-inch posts stacked three high, and planted, maintained, and harvested by the renter throughout the season. Because they are just 4 feet wide, the beds offer easy access from any side for planting, weeding, harvesting, and working the soil. Lengths of the beds vary from 4 feet to 16 feet with the 16-foot beds easily providing a steady stream of vegetables for a family of four.

Anyone in the county is welcome to rent a bed. Last year, three beds were rented by rural landowners, with more planning to participate this year. While Newcastle itself is in USDA Plant Hardiness zone 4a (-25 to -30°F), which makes the growing season short and challenging, just a few miles north of town climbing into the Black Hills the climate becomes inhospitable for gardening. With the gain in elevation, the hardiness zone drops to 3b (-30 to -35°F). Late-season snowstorms, cooler day and nighttime temperatures, and early frosts make gardening very difficult in the hills.



The gardener was able to harvest cherry tomatoes, onions, peas, cabbage, carrots, lettuce, peppers, and beets from this 16-foot raised bed.

Rural Residents Welcome to Use Community Garden

Rural landowners have found gardening at the community garden much easier, and, since many commute to work in town, they are able to maintain their raised beds during lunch breaks or after work.

Protecting the garden from rabbits, deer, and other hungry critters can be a constant challenge in the country. Deer can consume in a night what took weeks to grow, and keeping them out requires at least a 6-foot high fence around the entire garden, which isn't a practical option in many situations. The Weston County Community Garden area was already fenced on two sides with 8-foot fencing (to separate the playground from surrounding streets) and the garden committee added 6-foot fencing and three gates to the remaining two sides before any planting was done. (**Coordinator's note:** some resource professionals recommend at least an 8-foot or even a 10-foot high woven wire fence for deer.)

Poor local soil conditions may also play a part in a decision for a rural landowner to head to town to garden.

Raised Beds Require Planning

While the smaller, narrower space a raised bed provides makes working the area easier, it does require careful planning to make the best use of the space. Rows of carrots, onions, lettuce, and spinach are easy to plant, but larger vine plants such as cucumbers, zucchini, green beans, and peas require gardeners to think about encouraging the plants to grow up rather than out. An easy way to do this is simply turn a tomato cage upside down and allow the plants to scramble up the wires. This technique has the added advantage of keeping vegetables out of direct contact with the soil and lessening the possibility for rot. Just make sure these taller plants are placed so they don't shade the shorter rows of vegetables!



For this garden, a local contractor donated several truckloads of good-quality topsoil, which makes up two-thirds of the soil in the beds, and the other third consists of equal parts of well-aged manure from a local ranch and compost from the City of Newcastle's free community compost pile. Gardeners can add further soil amendments if they choose and are encouraged to add amendments as the plants begin to grow and use the nutrients from the soil. No pesticides or herbicides are allowed. Instead, gardeners are encouraged to pull weeds by hand and use natural methods of pest control such as neem oil spray.

A band of 36 Rocky Mountain junipers serves as a windbreak on the north side. The garden also has a 100-foot by 30-foot section in one corner known as the Pumpkin Patch, which was planted with pumpkins, cantaloupe, gourds, sunflowers, and other plants that would quickly outgrow a raised bed. Additionally, a local volunteer renovated the dilapidated greenhouse on site and started hundreds of seedlings that were eventually transplanted to the outside garden.

With the start of the growing season just around the corner and with the raised beds already in place,



Gardeners can rent a row of space in the Pumpkin Patch, which provides an area for larger plants such as sunflowers and squash that do not fit in the raised beds.

gardeners will be preparing their raised beds for planting soon. Whether you have a full garden at home or wish to join a community garden for extra growing space, or to swap seeds, stories, tips, and recipes, a visit to a local community garden will likely provide new knowledge and ideas for gardening endeavors.

Mulch, proper irrigation system saves labor, water

Providing water to thirsty plants is a top priority. Because raised beds can sometimes dry out quickly, mulch is recommended to help hold moisture in the bed. Due to the large size and layout of the community garden, faucets are provided with hoses and nozzles for watering, but a gardener using raised beds at home would do well to incorporate drip irrigation to reduce watering time and labor and conserve water.

Because work began on the garden in early spring 2009, the raised beds were not ready for planting until June; however, even with this late start, gardeners were able to harvest fast-growing vegetables, such as lettuce and spinach, in just a few weeks. Because soil warms quicker in raised beds, seeds and other plants grew quickly; once lettuce and other cool-season vegetables were harvested, the freed-up space was used to plant peppers, squash, or other plants, providing a nice way to rotate crops and get a large harvest from a small space.

Christina Schmidt is the district manager for the Weston County Natural Resource District and a founding member of the Weston County Community Garden. She can be contacted at (307) 746-3264 or Christina.Schmidt@wy.nacdnet.net