



35 Years and Still Growing

the history of

Burlington Area Community
Gardens

1972-2007

by Jim Flint

This is the story of how a community grows gardens, and how gardens have, in return, helped to grow a community.

Gardens for All, 1972-1982

In the early 1970's, Charlotte, Vermont was home base for Lyman Wood and a group of entrepreneurs from the Garden Way Company. During the 1960s, Wood worked with Garden Way to develop a profitable business manufacturing Troy Bilt® rototillers from a factory in Troy, New York and selling the tillers by mail order. Wood was also behind the growth of the Vermont branch of the company, Garden Way Associates, which was based in part on his vision of the "Garden Way of Life." The Garden Way complex on Ferry Road in Charlotte included a manufacturing facility producing Garden Way carts, in addition to the headquarters for Garden Way Publishing and Garden Way Research.

Garden Way was interested in finding ways to promote vegetable gardening and improve garden access for city dwellers. After visiting the Fenway Community Gardens in Boston, Wood and his associates, Dick Raymond and Sky Thurber, proposed establishing a community garden program on a smaller scale for Burlington residents. Their September 1971 proposal was accepted by the Burlington Parks Department and resulted in the spring 1972 opening of the Cliffside Community Garden on land that is now Oakledge Park.

Concurrently, two teachers at Burlington's H.O. Wheeler Elementary School, Nell Albert and Delia O'Dwyer, thought that a group garden would be an excellent project for the *Follow Through Program*, a part of Head Start. The teachers got in touch with Garden Way staffer Dick Raymond, who offered to help them get started on land provided by Shelburne Farms. Fifteen Burlington families enjoyed participating in the garden program in 1972, one parent commenting that "We're proud of our vegetables and we're proud of ourselves."

The success of the two community garden projects prompted Wood to found *Gardens For All* and to hire Tommy Thompson, a retired restaurant owner from Ascutney, Vermont, as GFA's community gardens director. Thompson began work in January, 1973, and his efforts during the winter and spring resulted in the establishment of fourteen community gardens in Burlington and surrounding towns. Burlington's community gardens were located at Cliffside Park, Mansfield Avenue, two sites on Appletree Point, three sites off North Avenue, two sites off Pine Street, and two sites at the University of Vermont.

From 1974-76, Gardens For All expanded to 23 sites in the Burlington area and nearly 1,000 plots, including large gardens in front of St. Paul's Cathedral in Burlington, in the apple orchard on UVM land off East Avenue, and on Water Tower Hill at UVM. Thompson worked with a "chairman" at each site to rototill plots and recruit gardeners. Plots were provided free or for a small donation. Although there were plenty of garden plots available, access to water was limited at most sites.

From 1976-79, Gardens For All expanded its efforts to advocate for community gardens statewide and nationally. Community gardens in Burlington and surrounding towns continued, but several sites were lost to development or non-renewed leases. A bright spot was the establishment in 1976 of the Ethan Allen Homestead Community Garden, located on land provided by the Winooski Valley Park District. The UVM Hospital Garden, which is now the Medical Center Community Garden, was established in 1977. During the 1979 season, 515 garden plots were rented in and around Burlington.

In December 1979, Larry Sommers, was hired as community gardens coordinator for Gardens For All. Sommer's task was to reinvigorate the Burlington area community garden system and help the program to become self supporting. With Sommers help, new garden projects were created by Gardens For All involving senior citizens, prison inmates, and area youth. Burlington area programs included harvest festivals, school gardens, workshops, and a tool lending system at Fletcher Free Library.

One of Tommy Thompson's goals was to establish permanent community garden sites. Thompson negotiated with the Burlington Electric Department to establish the Intervale Community Garden in 1980 with 20 organic gardening plots. Larry Sommers and Joanne Dennee were the first site coordinators for the new garden. A 20-year lease was later established for the Intervale Community Garden, and in 1988 the garden was renamed the Tommy Thompson Community Garden in honor of Thompson, who died unexpectedly in March, 1983.

Senior citizen gardens were established in Burlington at the Cathedral Square high rise apartments in 1981 and at Fern Hill in 1982. While a student at UVM, Charlie Nardozi conducted gardening classes for seniors and worked with residents to establish a permanent handicapped accessible garden. After two years in the Peace Corps, he returned to the Burlington area to work for Gardens For All and its successor, the National Gardening Association. Nardozi served on BACG's Advisory Board from 1984 to 1994.

Lynn Ocone of Gardens For All worked with Nardozi and Sommers in 1981 to create youth garden programs at the Franklin Square housing project in Burlington and the Champlain Elementary School. Experiences gained were used as the foundation for the nationally printed *Youth Garden Book*, authored by Ocone. The following year, the Champlain Community Garden, which was originally located off Shelburne Road, moved to its present location adjacent to the school and Englesby Brook.

Burlington Area Community Gardens: an Independent Nonprofit Organization 1982-1986

In 1982, Burlington's community gardens faced a major challenge when Gardens For All lost funding support from its long term fiscal sponsor, the Garden Way Company. As Gardens For All refocused its nonprofit mission to concentrate on national gardening programs, Sommers worked with GFA staff and community volunteers to form an independent nonprofit organization, Burlington Area Community Gardens, Inc., to manage the local community gardens.

Aided by a start-up grant from Gardens For All, BACG functioned as a non-profit growing from 1983 through 1986. During this time, a board of directors was formed, the registration process for community garden plots was centralized, and plot fees were standardized. The start-up funds allowed BACG to hire a part-time director who worked from an office on Cherry Street. To celebrate community gardening, a popular Zucchini Festival was held during the summer at City Hall Park.

By the 1985 season, BACG had downsized from ten to eight garden sites. Of the 255 available plots, 190 were rented. With plot fees at \$25 per plot, the Board of Directors realized that major fundraising

would be needed to continue BACG as a nonprofit. Efforts were made to garner corporate sponsorships, but time was running out for BACG to pay its part-time staff person and program expenses.

BACG Stabilizes under Burlington Parks and Recreation: 1987-1992

In the fall of 1986, the BACG Board was faced with financial obligations and an empty bank account. At the annual BACG meeting in November, the Board voted to request that the City of Burlington take over management of the community gardens. Parks and Recreation Director, Sid Baker, who had helped launch the first Burlington Community Garden at Cliffside in 1972, agreed to continue the BACG program under Parks and Recreation, and to cover BACG's outstanding obligations.

Baker turned to Recreation Assistant, Maggie Leugers, who had recently joined the department. Leugers enthusiastically agreed to coordinate the gardens and work with the BACG Advisory Board to stabilize the system. In 1987, 258 plots were available at seven sites, with plot fees reduced to \$20. The one-acre Burlington Youth Employment Garden, founded in 1982 as the Mayor's Youth Garden, continued to operate at the Intervale Community Garden through 1992.

From 1987-1992, garden plots and garden sites fluctuated. The 29-plot garden site behind the Catholic Charities offices on North Ave closed in 1988, and the popular 45-plot Orchard Community Garden on East Avenue closed in 1990. A new site at the UVM Bio-Research Center with 40 garden plots opened in 1991. By the 1992 season, there were a total of 222 garden plots available at six garden sites, and a waiting list had developed for the program.

Through this time period, the BACG Advisory Board was active in building community, fundraising, and planning for the future. Well attended annual community garden picnics were held at Oakledge Park and Ethan Allen Homestead. A garden judging contest was held in early July to acknowledge the accomplishments of exemplary gardeners at each site. A Fun Run Race was started in 1989, became the Tomato Two-Miler in 1991, and continued as an annual fund raiser for BACG until 1999. Gardener's Supply Company served as a major sponsor for the event. The BACG Annual meeting was a tradition during November, and garden sites were encouraged to create exhibits at the Champlain Valley Fair.

In 1991, the BACG Advisory Board produced a detailed five-year plan outlining the current status of the program, needs assessment, and potential resources and funding mechanisms. The plan laid the groundwork for the creation of new garden sites and the establishment of educational programs geared toward youth, beginning gardeners, and low income participants.

The major goals of the Five Year Plan were:

- To establish permanent or long term garden sites throughout the city.
- To provide garden sites within a 10-minute traveling time from home or work.
- To provide garden plots at as moderate a cost as possible, to cover the costs of the program, and to allow for reduced fees for those in need of assistance.
- To provide educational support for gardeners of all ages.
- To maintain high visibility for the community garden program.

Working with the Planning and Zoning Department, and Burlington Parks and Recreation, the BACG Advisory Board secured permission in 1990 for development of a new community garden at Starr Farm in Burlington's New North End. The Starr Farm site would provide much needed neighborhood garden space, but lack of funding and board capacity caused development plans to initially be postponed.

BACG Program Expands: 1992-2000

In the fall of 1992, the BACG Advisory Board formed a grassroots organization, Friends of Starr Farm Community Garden, to develop and manage the Starr Farm Community Garden as a separate entity. Permission was granted from the Parks and Recreation Commission and Mayor Peter Clavelle to recruit gardeners and pursue grants for the new garden site. A small group of board volunteers led by Charlie Nardozzi, Karen Halverson, Lisa Halvorsen, and Jim Flint was successful in raising \$3500 in grant funds to install a water system, print and mail registration forms, and purchase insurance for the garden site. Starr Farm opened in 1993 with 50 plots. The site expanded to 60 plots the following year, and in 1995 officially became a part of BACG.

Several new ideas first tested at Starr Farm were incorporated into the BACG system. These included sign-ups for spring and fall work days, registering gardeners for half-plots, and creating perennial areas. In 1995, the Starr Farm Kids' Garden was established as a pilot youth gardening project. The garden expanded to a 5,000 square foot area the following year.

BACG continued its expansion during 1994-1996. In 1994, a community garden was redeveloped at the Catholic Charities site and opened as the New Americans Community Garden. In 1996, a 10-plot community garden was developed at Rock Point, and the Children's Discovery Garden was established at Ethan Allen Homestead. This interactive public children's garden included 24 12 ft. x 10 ft. garden plots for children, four circular theme gardens, and a butterfly garden. A Secret Garden and summer arts program were added to the site in 1997. The Children's Discovery Garden was used extensively for VNA Family Room Garden programs from 2000-2005.

In 1996, Friends of Starr Farm Community Garden evolved into Friends of Burlington Area Community Gardens. Jim Flint was appointed treasurer for FBACG, which raised funds, submitted grants, and coordinated special projects at BACG sites. These included sponsoring harvest festivals at Ethan Allen Homestead, planting trees at Starr Farm, and installing a water system for the Children's Discovery Garden and the Wheelock Farm Community Garden. A brochure was designed and printed by FBACG in 1997 to incorporate children's plots into the BACG system.

BACG's registration system was computerized in 1994. By 1996, the BACG program had grown to eight sites with 300 plots, and two youth gardens with 48 plots. Outreach efforts included exhibits at the Vermont Flower Show and the publication of a BACG brochure. Spring potluck dinners to kick off the gardening season were held from 1996-2001 at H.O. Wheeler School. From 1999-2002, BACG coordinated a Garden Olympics at Ethan Allen Homestead as part of the Intervale Festival.

In 1999, several major site changes were made. The New Americans site was closed due to a faulty water system and maintenance difficulties. This resulted in a loss of 20 half plots. The 40-plot UVM Farm

Garden at the Bio-Research Center was closed due to poor drainage. The 18-plot Admissions Garden, originally started by Tommy Thompson in 1973, was closed due the construction of a bike path by UVM through the center of the garden. While not a part of BACG, the community garden on Mansfield Avenue managed by the Sisters of Mercy was closed with the development of the McAuley Square Housing Project. Several gardeners displaced from the site were incorporated into the Medical Center and Tommy Thompson Community Gardens.

In cooperation with UVM, a new 12-plot community garden was founded in 1999 at the Wheelock Farm site on the corner of Swift and Spear streets. To help accommodate relocating gardeners, Rock Point was expanded to 16 plots. Through the efforts of site coordinator Ron Krupp, the Tommy Thompson Community Garden expanded to 130 garden plots in 1999, and again to 150 garden plots in 2002. A pole barn to provide shelter was constructed at the Tommy Thompson Community Garden in 2001.

BACG plot fees were \$25 from 1987-1991, \$30 from 1992-93, \$40 from 1994-2000, and \$42 from 2001-2002. Half plot fees increased from \$20 to \$25 in 1999. Youth garden plots were \$15 in 1996, \$10 from 1997-2000, and \$12 in 2001-02. Straw bales were offered for sale in 2002 in addition to mulch hay. Scholarships have consistently been available to limited income families to cover half the cost of a regular, half, or youth plot. Donations for scholarships were provided by fellow gardeners, who contributed on their registration form.

BACG gardens often serve as sites for programs serving families, children, and immigrants. The Visiting Nurses Association Family Room Garden, originally begun in 1990 at H.O. Wheeler School, moved from the New Americans Garden to Ethan Allen Homestead in 1999. The Family Room Garden programs, led by Sarah Sinnott, provide an array of garden-based activities for children and parents.

BACG secures new leadership and partnerships: 2001-2007

By 2001, the BACG board realized that Burlington's community gardens program had grown to the point where more support was needed from the City and from the community. To meet the challenge, the BACG board voted to incorporate Friends of Burlington Area Community Gardens (FBACG) as a nonprofit organization. Josh Brown served as president of the FBACG Board of Directors, and Jim Flint agreed to serve as executive director. In 2001-2002, FBACG and the BACG Advisory Board functioned jointly to help develop awareness of community gardens, secure grants for garden improvements, initiate educational programs, and advocate for public policies that support community gardening.

Through the FBACG/BACG partnership, Plant a Row for the Hungry, a national program which encourages gardeners to donate food to area anti-poverty agencies, was incorporated into the BACG program in 2001. Several hundred pounds of food are donated each year by BACG gardeners to the Food Shelf and other participating agencies via Plant a Row.

In March 2002, the Burlington City Council passed a unanimous resolution to support the long term maintenance and expansion of the BACG program. On April 6, 2002, a 30th Anniversary Celebration for BACG was held at Burlington High School, with 150 community gardeners and supporters in attendance. At the celebration, Mayor Peter Clavelle read a proclamation of support for the BACG program, and Superintendent of Recreation Maggie Leugers received an award recognizing her 15 years of leadership.

The Lakeview Community Garden became BACG's eighth garden site in May 2002, making a total of 318 regular plots and 57 youth plots in the BACG system. In 2002, nearly all plots were rented by May 1. With the help of CDBG grant funding secured by FBACG, the Rock Point South Community Garden was opened with 12 plots in 2003. CDBG grant support also provided funding to construct water systems for Rock Point and Starr Farm, and compost for the Rock Point, Starr Farm, and the WVPD community gardens. The expansion added 24 plots to the BACG system, bringing BACG's total to nearly 400 plots.

The Community Teaching Garden was established by FBACG at Ethan Allen Homestead in 2003 to provide a 20-week educational program for beginning gardeners. Through the efforts of K.K. Wilder and Parks and Recreation, two accessible raised garden beds, constructed from septic tanks, were added to the Ethan Allen Homestead site in 2003.

Advocacy work by BACG and FBACG board members in the fall of 2002 resulted in the approval of city funding in 2003 to hire Lisa Coven as coordinator for the BACG program. In 2005, the BACG coordinator position became a permanent staff position within Parks and Recreation. Lisa Coven continues to serve as BACG's coordinator and as land steward for the City of Burlington.

In December, 2003, Friends of Burlington Area Community Gardens shortened its name to Friends of Burlington Gardens to reflect its broader mission of support for community, neighborhood, youth, and school gardening initiatives. In 2005, *Patchwork: stories of gardens and community* was published by Friends of Burlington Gardens and Community Works Press. *Patchwork* includes first person vignettes from gardeners within the Burlington Area Community Gardens program. In 2006, FBG established the Vermont Community Garden Network to support community, school, neighborhood, and group garden projects statewide.

BACG's growth and development has been aided by volunteer board members, site coordinators, and gardeners who have dedicated their efforts to the garden program and its sustainability. From the youngest child carrying a pail of compost in a bucket brigade, to Cornelius Reed and Charlie Krumholz, who have faithfully plowed and rototilled Burlington's community gardens, hundreds of area residents continue to contribute to the history of Burlington Area Community Gardens and to benefit from one of the longest running community garden programs in the United States.

In the words of Tommy Thompson,

**Someday, when enough people see this joy
and experience it themselves,
there just may be "gardens for all."**

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Cover Photo: Tommy Thompson (1917-1983) at work at the community garden in the Intervale that now bears his name. Thompson was the first community garden coordinator in Burlington and played an important role in organizing America's community gardening movement.