

# Vermont Community Garden Network

## 2016 Grow It! Evaluation Report

Vermont Community Garden Network staff, in partnership with Charlie Nardozi, travelled the state for our fourth year of the Grow It! workshops, bringing together diverse groups of community and school garden leaders at **10 regional locations across Vermont**.

This year we took the Grow It! program in a new direction. Our **spring workshops** took place at seven locations and were focused on building organizing skills for garden leaders. Our **fall program included workshops for garden leaders followed by public forums**, located at four sites around the state. The fall focus was on management of community-based garden infrastructure, namely composting systems.

All of this year's programs continued to provide opportunities for people to connect, share ideas, brainstorm solutions, and gain timely tips in garden and community leadership.

Through **11 workshops** over the spring and fall, and **four public forums**, VCGN reached **121 garden leaders and compost advocates** (unduplicated). Over the course of these **15 events**, we connected with more than **70 different community and school gardens groups** from around the state.

### 7 Spring Garden Leadership Workshops:

**Montpelier:** North Branch Nature Center

**Bennington:** Mount Anthony Union Middle School

**Proctor:** Proctor Elementary School

**Sheffield:** Miller's Run School

**Westminster:** Westminster Center School

**Thetford:** Thetford Elementary School

**South Burlington:** Common Roots

### 4 Fall Compost Workshops & Forums:

**Rutland:** College of St. Joseph

**Bakersfield:** Bakersfield Elementary Middle School

**Orleans:** Orleans Elementary School

**Woodstock:** Woodstock Union High School and Middle School

## What Happened

The **spring workshops** for garden leaders highlighted:

- **Best practices** in recruiting, engaging and managing volunteers in community-based gardens;
- **Solutions** for addressing specific issues participants came to share;
- **A visit to a local community-based garden** for an in-person look and discussion led by Charlie Nardozi, examining the role garden design can play in meeting volunteer needs;
- **Networking opportunities** for garden leaders to share stories, swap ideas, and brainstorm together to build healthier gardens, stronger programs, and more coordinated regional garden efforts.



Woodstock Union High School and Middle School teacher and student (Kat and Oliver) share their system and composting knowledge at a Grow It! workshop.

Our theme for the **fall workshops and forums**—community compost—was inspired by the new phased requirements through Vermont’s Act 148, the Universal Recycling Law, including the ban of yard debris and food scraps from the landfill. Community composting is seen as a solution for Vermont communities to communally manage these materials through small to medium-scale compost systems, and utilize them for local value.

**Fall workshops** followed our classic Grow It workshop format—information, resource and idea sharing between groups and an in-person look at what it takes to build and maintain a successful community composting system.



Expert panel—compost consultants James McSweeney and Cat Buxton, school nurse and compost manager at Thetford ES Joette Hayashigawa, and Solid Waste District educator Ham Gillett—at Community Composting Forum, Woodstock, Vt.

**The Community Composting Forums** brought together a wide range of local and statewide perspectives around the practice of managing food scraps through community composting, examining the role community and school garden composting systems can play in these efforts. Each event included a presentation by regional community composting expert, James McSweeney, of Compost Technical Services and a panel discussion facilitated by Charlie Nardozzi, including James and two to three additional area experts.

## Who Participated

The **83 garden leaders** who attended **Grow It! workshops** this year included dedicated volunteers and passionate nonprofit, municipal and school staff who support and manage **68 community-based gardens**. **More than 60% of participants were attending Grow It! for the first time.** Among the attendees were:

- **Long-time garden coordinators** on the lookout for opportunities to build their leadership skills;
- **Groups of gardeners** seeking advice for starting a new garden or improving an existing one;
- **Community volunteers** including Extension Master Gardeners and others looking for a way to offer their time and knowledge to local groups;
- **Service providers** offering resources and working to better understand the issues of the groups in their area and how to best meet their needs.

Many of these individuals are working to make incredible change in their communities and schools with a small amount of resources and support. The Grow It! workshop series serves as a twice-a-year (spring and fall) touch-point for garden leaders to connect with others doing this work, receive skills-building support from VCGN staff, and better understand how to access the resources available to support their gardens.

This year Grow It! broadened its reach by drawing **60 community members** for the **Community Composting Forums**. Among

*“[I] wasn’t sure of the next steps to take; now I have all kinds of info.”*  
-Community Composting Forum Participant



Garden leaders, new and experienced, swap stories at Miller’s Run School. (Photo courtesy of Joseph Gresser, Barton Chronicle)

these people were:

- **Community garden coordinators** considering changing their compost system to accept food scraps;
- **Teachers, parents and school staff** looking to start composting their school's cafeteria food scraps;
- **Residents** concerned about the law and curious about the possibility of composting with their neighbors;
- **Service providers and businesses**, including representatives from local Solid Waste Management Districts, sharing their resources and knowledge, and interested in the role small scale community composting can play in addressing Act 148.

## Practical Information & Friendly People

At all of our 2016 Grow It! events participants commented on the usefulness of the information shared and the friendliness of people they met in an atmosphere conducive to bouncing ideas and swapping stories.

*"I loved the emphasis on networking. The topics aligned with what I will need to think about in my gardens."*

Stated outcomes for participants from both the workshops and forums included a wide range of next steps. Here's a small sampling:

- **Start or expand** composting systems with the help of new connections;
- **Improve** systems for garden communication and engagement based on best practices;
- **Re-design** composting systems inspired by featured models;
- **Pursue new routes** for recruiting volunteers for the garden, identified through group discussion;
- **Apply** for grants shared to support garden initiatives;
- **Implement** community-building initiatives inspired by ideas shared.

*"Practical! Fun! Worthwhile!"*

Participants walked away with practical tools, ideas and resources to implement new practices in garden volunteer coordination, improve underutilized compost systems, and make changes to their work to improve community and school garden operations across the state.

## Reflection & Looking Forward

When we look back over the last four years of Grow It! we can proudly say that we have grown our network by leaps and bounds. We have directly connected with and supported more than **411 distinct garden leaders**, impacting over **200 different community and school gardens** that provide space for many **thousands of Vermonters** to grow their own food, offer opportunities for both youth and adults to connect with the earth and learn where their food comes from, and foster a sense of belonging to a positive community effort.



Charlie Nardozzi facilitates a small group conversation in Sheffield, Vt.  
(Photo courtesy of Joseph Gresser, Barton Chronicle)

*Since the first Grow It! workshop in spring 2013, we have reached more than **411 distinct garden leaders** from over **200 different community-based gardens and related groups**.*

As we look forward our task is to continue to provide this support and direct connection we know our network values, while expanding our impact to more potential and current garden leaders across the state. We see the following new opportunities as steps toward that goal:

- 2016 workshops saw lower participation numbers than in past years. We believe that part of this trend is due to more remote workshop locations. In the coming year we plan to **concentrate our efforts in key locations**—holding our Grow It! events in population centers and areas where garden efforts are already underway and plentiful.
- Our new model, focusing on **specific topics such as garden infrastructure and innovations**, was well-received. We'd like to continue this in 2017 by designing one of our two annual Grow It! events with these themes in mind. We feel that promoting a different model—perhaps more informal and shorter in length—will encourage continued participation from garden leaders who are looking for something new.
- We plan to also continue to provide the much-needed garden organizing and leadership training through our more traditional Grow It! workshop. However, we hope to enhance that model by **collaborating with local groups and garden leaders to co-lead** components of the workshop. Our intention is to further our goal in promoting regional leadership and continuing to provide real on-the-ground examples of what works in garden management.
- Already underway is collaboration with New England Grassroots Environment Fund (NEGEF) to provide **webinars for garden groups that address requested topic areas** such as budgeting and fundraising, which they are best equipped to offer.
- This fall we expanded access to our **closed Facebook group for garden leaders** to our broader network. We hope to use this as a tool to strengthen our network and statewide collaboration and encourage resource sharing among garden leaders.
- In the coming year we plan to continue to **review our long-term goals** for our Grow It! series. We will keep our ultimate goal in mind—developing regional hubs of community-based garden leaders to enhance regional support and connectedness.

## Thank You!

Thanks everyone for another wonderful season of Grow It! workshops and Community Composting Forums! We are grateful to our hosts: North Branch Nature Center, Mount Anthony Union Middle School, Proctor Elementary School, Miller's Run School, Westminster Center School, Thetford Elementary School, Common Roots, College of St. Joseph, Bakersfield Elementary Middle School, Orleans Elementary School, and Woodstock Union High School & Middle School.



Many thanks to our partners for the Community Composting Forums, James McSweeney and Charlie Nardoizzi, and our panelists, Aaron Shepard, Bob Engstrom, Carl Deithelm, Paul Tomasi, Hilary Elmer, Joette Hayashigawa, Cat Buxton, and Ham Gillett. Thank you for making this conversation possible!

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And finally we're appreciative of our local and regional partners who help us share these statewide opportunities: Addison County Relocalization Network, Burlington Area Community Gardens/Burlington Parks, Recreation, Waterfront, Center for an Agricultural Economy, City of Winooski, Common Roots, Food Connects, Fresh Start Community Farm, Good Food Good Medicine, Green Mountain Farm to School, Marble Valley Grows, Northshire Grows, Rutland Area Farm and Food Link, St. Johnsbury Area Local Food Alliance, Sustainable Woodstock, Upper Valley Food Coop, and Vital Communities.