

HANDS in the Dirt 2016 Program Report

HANDS in the Dirt is a collaboration of the Vermont Community Garden Network and HANDS (Helping And Nurturing Diverse Seniors), in partnership with Ethan Allen Residence, Burlington Veterans Administration, St. Michael's College, Committee on Temporary Shelter, Cathedral Square, Burlington Parks Recreation & Waterfront, and Charlie Nardozzi. The 2016 programming was made possible with support from the Fountain Fund through an Innovations and Collaborations Grant from the Vermont Community Foundation, as well as a City Market Seedling Grant, and other support. We are grateful for these funders and additional contributions from our community partners and business partners.

Research shows that senior gardening programs improve independence and dignity, reduce stress, improve nutrition, provide education, reduce signs of dementia, lower blood pressure, and help seniors develop crucial social connections. Senior veterans have high rates of homelessness, substance abuse, and suicide and can benefit greatly from this type of program. All of the partners are supporting seniors and veterans in disconnected ways. This new approach helped maximize the capacity of each organization, while allowing for more coordinated services and better exchange of information.

Working with established and new garden sites, this new and expanded collaboration provided the space and support for coordinated garden and nutrition activities at senior and transitional housing sites, as well as intergenerational activities for a population at risk of social isolation, a positive holistic approach to wellness for veterans, and fresh, healthy food to food insecure populations.

The ultimate goal of this work is happier, more social seniors and veterans with a high level of confidence and food security.



Charlie Nardozzi leads a workshop for veterans and peer support staff at the St. Michael's College Permaculture Garden.



VCGN Intern Emma and Astrid enjoy snacking on a yellow wax bean while harvesting calendula flowers at Ethan Allen Residence.



Elly teaches Alexis how to fold over a handmade tortilla for a Mexican-themed garden snack at the Archibald Neighborhood Garden.

Overview

Senior and Intergenerational Garden Programs

In partnership with HANDS, Vermont Community Garden Network staff and interns coordinated weekly senior gardening activities for a third year at Ethan Allen Residence and piloted an intergenerational gardening project at Archibald Community Garden and a cooking with garden-fresh produce workshops at Thayer House. Over the course of **13 weeks**, we spent **44 contact hours** with more than **53 seniors** and **5 preschool-aged children**.

- **Ethan Allen Residence:** 13 weeks of activities, 12 seniors
- **Archibald Neighborhood Garden:** 13 weeks of activities, 18 seniors (total includes weekly gardening and Champlain Senior Center workshop), 5 youth
- **Thayer House:** 6 workshops, 23 seniors



Chef Robin makes gazpacho during a cooking workshop at Thayer House.

Veterans Garden Programs

A new collaboration with the Burlington Veterans Administration, St. Michael's College, and COTS expanded the HANDS partnership to include two new gardens for veterans. Garden expert Charlie Nardozzi facilitated garden planning and workshops for **16 veterans** at the St. Michael's College Permaculture Garden and **5 veterans** at COTS Canal Street housing site in Winooski. Many of the participating veterans suffer from PTSD and isolation and some are food insecure.

- **COTS Canal Street Veterans:** 8 weeks of activities, 5-10 veterans and members of partner organizations
- **St. Michael's College Veterans:** 22 weeks of activities, with 5-10 people through August and 1-3 people after the first week in September (mix of about 16 different veterans, St. Michael's College Students, and staff)



Charlie Nardozzi and Todd check the tomato plants at Canal Street Veterans Housing.

The experiences we shared with seniors and veterans in 2016 successfully addressed these VCGN goals:

- Engage participants in garden-based activities to meet their physical, cognitive, emotional and social needs.
- Produce fresh, healthy food to increase participant wellness and food security.
- Facilitate opportunities for participants to regain past gardening and cooking skills and acquire new skills.
- Foster nurturing attitudes among participants to take responsibility for plants in the garden.
- Design and assist in maintaining a garden space that encourages social interactions, sensory stimulation and increases daily exercise.
- Create meaningful and purposeful opportunities for memory recollection and storytelling.



VCGN Garden Education Manager Carolina Lukac demonstrates how to make tea from garden herbs. This garden-themed workshop brought together Bhutanese and Old North End seniors.

Successes

- Our groups worked very well together as we developed and implemented programming.
- Canal Street Housing was thrilled to have some permanent gardens right outside their door. The gardens helped reduce isolation and build community at the new housing site.
- St. Michael's donated space for larger gardens and provided a high level of garden support and engagement with the program.
- Weekly programs at both veterans sites were well attended at the beginning of the growing season.
- High-quality garden instruction from Charlie Nardozi and VCGN staff.
- The Ethan Allen Residence programming's predictable rhythm of weekly activities (garden walk, craft activity, and snack preparation) was very engaging for seniors and also a helpful way to mentor interns in designing appropriate activities.
- The Archibald garden was a good place to experiment with garden-inspired recipes that mostly included raw finger food such as dips and sauces for eating vegetables. This program helped us identify which utensils we should include in an "outdoor garden kitchen."
- Many of the sites provided valuable intergenerational connections (pre-schoolers and seniors at the Archibald Garden, college students and older veterans at St. Michael's College, and young adults and seniors at Ethan Allen Residence and Thayer House)
- The Thayer House cooking workshops provided an excellent way for the residents to become more confident using their free farm shares and fresh garden produce. Partnering a VCGN intern with a chef educator allowed us to provide a high level of engaging cooking instruction with a focus on simple, healthy dishes. This was our best attended program. Another indicator of success was that the seniors reported making the dishes at home.

Here is an example from the veterans gardening program at St. Michael's College: "Joe" is an older veteran who attended one of our initial planning meetings. The only word he spoke was his name as we introduced ourselves. He was totally incommunicative otherwise. The first day in the garden, he became a totally different person. His eyes sparkled as he spoke of gardening and farming when he was younger. Joe couldn't wait to meet and work with Charlie Nardozi, his "gardening hero." He was fully engaged in prepping the soil and planting veggies. Even Joe's VA caseworker was shocked. She said, "I have NEVER seen him like this!" Joe gardened throughout the season and is looking forward to next year's program.

The program's impact went beyond the veterans, with benefits for the greater college community. In the words of Kristyn Achilich, Academic Program Coordinator for the Garden & Permaculture Sites, "It was the first year of many events for the garden program here at the college: first year for this position, first year farming in this location, and at this scale, first year as the primary farm manager. As such, I thought of our role, my role, in this project as one of technical assistance and administrator of the physical garden site. However, the impact of this collaboration on me, my students and the site was profound. My students engaged with members of our community in need who had also served in the highest capacity – keeping our lands safe and open. This was not lost on them or me and brought great diligence, respect and reverence for the partnership. Our Salad Day gatherings were the best example to see witness these successes. In addition, having this program in place when students returned to campus offered an opportunity to witness the power of community gardening and for faculty to think of creative ways to incorporate the program in subsequent years. In addition, the program allowed our own Student Veterans Association to opportunity to engage with a program on campus."

A highlight from the Archibald garden was a garden tea party with a group of seniors from the Ethan Allen Residence and the preschoolers. We sipped on iced lemon verbena and tulsi tea, mixed butter with edible flowers, and sliced cucumbers for tea sandwiches. Witnessing the joyful interactions between seniors and preschoolers who mutually supported each other through activities gave a strong sense of the rich experiences that intergenerational garden programs can offer.

Challenges

- Low participation at the Archibald site and reduced participation at the St. Michael's site at the end of the summer.
- We need a better and more consistent system for gathering data and sharing stories among the different programs.
- St. Michael's staff and students spent a lot of time tending the gardens between veteran visits.

What We Learned

The experience we have gained from spending more time gardening with seniors has been insightful for us as garden educators working with an aging population. For example, we recognize the time and energy needed for staff to do the bulk of garden maintenance and we notice how activities that can be completed during one activity morning might be more appropriate for seniors with memory loss. The observation that has left the deepest impression is recognizing the many similarities of gardening and cooking with seniors and young children – for example: plastic kid-friendly knives are easy for seniors to use, eating raw harvest directly in the garden brings immense joy, elders and youth often hesitate to try new foods, and they are both drawn to the sensory stimulation of herbs in the garden. Successful garden education programs must accommodate for different ability levels and learning styles of participants.

We also learned how important it is to ascertain the specific needs of each participant group and make sure that we are bringing programming to where people are instead of setting up a separate program site. For example, the Archibald site had low senior participation on open program days, but special days with organized “field trips” from senior housing sites and workshops held at the Champlain Senior Center were more successful.

Changes For 2017

In thinking about programming for next year, it will be essential to plan senior gardening programs that respond to the needs and interests of the seniors, veterans, and their communities.

- **Ethan Allen Residence:** This garden is an outdoor gathering space for seniors and also a source of fresh food ingredients for the kitchen staff. Designing an outdoor space that is both a productive garden and an educational/therapeutic garden for seniors will undoubtedly strengthen the partnership. Planting vegetables with long harvest windows and maintaining wide pathways are two considerations that will benefit the entire Ethan Allen Residence community.
- **Thayer House:** The residents and staff have asked for more workshops, so we plan to increase the number to 10 over the summer and fall.
- **Archibald Neighborhood Garden:** Instead of holding intergenerational workshops at the garden, we will partner with the Champlain Senior Center (now coordinated by Burlington Parks Recreation & Waterfront) to hold workshops at the senior center.
- **St. Michael's College:** Have a smaller garden area allocated to the veterans group and also have them work alongside the students to tend the larger SMC gardens. This would be more manageable and would encourage more overlap between the students, the campus SVA and the community VA members. SMC would also donate a portion of the food grown to the VA.
- **Canal Street Veterans Housing:** The small amount of garden space doesn't need as much attention as the other sites and since the gardeners live on site, they can care for the garden on their own schedule. In 2017, we will focus on beginning- and end-of-season support with fewer visits during the summer, and perhaps add some cooking classes.

Media

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Umdh5fR0dyo&feature=youtu.be>



<http://www.burlingtonfreepress.com/story/news/2016/07/09/garden-partnership-st-michaels/86881300/>

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Garden partnership at St. Michael's

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(Photo: Photo by Brian MacDonald)

COLCHESTER - During this season's fourth Salad Days lunch at picnic tables down by the St. Michael's permaculture-site gardens and greenhouses, area military veterans and community-garden champions joined college staff and student horticulturists to celebrate the growth of fresh produce and productive community partnerships.

Kristyn Achilich, Class of 2005, academic program coordinator for the site, says the introduction of between 10 and 15 regular former military volunteers through the local Veterans Administration to this year's gardening activities is a winning collaboration.

The regular student/staff garden-tenders welcome the help with planting, weeding and watering as they meet people who bring the wisdom of rich life experiences. Veterans say they enjoy "getting in the dirt" and learning new garden skills from community experts at workshops alongside the students.

More Participant Quotes & Stories

Thayer House Cooking Workshops

Two-thirds of the workshop participants have annual household income under \$15,000 and receive food assistance. In the final workshop evaluation, all the respondents said that the workshops had increased their confidence in using fresh vegetables and they wanted more.

“I had given up cooking after being in the hospital. Just too hard. These things, I am not finding them to be as hard.”

“I am diabetic and the doctor told me to eat health food. This health food, I like!”

“I learned that healthy eating doesn’t have to be complicated”

Ethan Allen Residence

A snapshot from the garden in July 2016: “Wednesday mornings we meet at Ethan Allen Residence with a group of 10-12 seniors who join us for garden walks, coffee and a garden activity. The most willing and able seniors will often join us to either weed, plant or pick flowers. We have made fresh strawberry dip, garden flags, garden mosaics and will continue to use elements from the garden to create activities that the seniors can enjoy and participate in. As Mary and I walk around the garden, she points out all the flowers she knows by name. Lloyd loves to be helpful and is always willing to help us plant. Martin told me how he used to be an artist and was in awe of the beautiful garden mosaic made by some of the other seniors that we placed it in the garden for a fun pop of color. After smelling some herbs, Dottie reminisced about how her Italian mother used to always cook with basil.” – Carolina Lukac, VCGN Garden Education Manager

Archibald Neighborhood Garden Intergenerational Activities

A snapshot from the garden in July 2016: “Upon arrival at the garden, the group of nearly 10 preschoolers and a few seniors circles up for some socializing and sharing. The preschoolers love to share with the group their favorite fruits and vegetables and some things they have enjoyed in the garden so far. Seniors share gardening tips, stories about gardens they have had in the past, and ways they prepare fresh fruits and vegetables. The group then helps tend to the shared HANDS in the Dirt plot by watering, planting, and harvesting. The seniors help out the preschoolers when they do not yet know how much to water or how deep to plant. The preschoolers help the seniors if they can’t quite reach a certain flower or plant in the garden. At the end of the program, the group gathers for a healthy, seasonally-inspired snack and some more story-time. When a senior asked a pre-school student to “name that plant” (a tomato plant), he excitedly proclaimed, ‘I call that one Charlotte!’” – Carolina Lukac, VCGN Garden Education Manager

Veterans Gardening Programs

Participants brought produce from the St. Michael’s College site to the VA food shelf. One day this summer, a young veteran was perplexed by the fresh green beans sitting in a basket at the VA’s food shelf. He didn’t even know what they were, never mind how to prepare them because he had only experienced highly-processed institutional food systems – elementary to secondary school then on to the military. This garden partnership made it possible for him to experience fresh vegetables. – As told to Kristyn Achilich, St. Michael’s College.