

Building Soil and Community

RUBY PERRY - CALAHAN COMMUNITY GARDEN



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Ruby Perry
Site Coordinator
Calahan Community Garden

The gardeners at Calahan Community Garden in Burlington, Vermont have a strong sense of ownership over their community garden with the supportive leadership of Site Coordinator, Ruby Perry, and her husband Andy Simon. Ruby and Andy began as gardeners at Calahan when they first moved to Burlington and didn't have access to a garden of their own. The garden is one of 14 managed by the city's Department of Parks, Recreation and Waterfront, which relies on volunteer site leaders to support the operations and gardener communications.

Ruby's roots in community activism and organizing made for great background as she stepped into this leadership role. "Leadership just comes naturally to me. I like trying something new, working with people, and figuring out how to make it happen." As she got started, Ruby explains, "It never occurred to me just to do what had always been done." Immediately they noticed that all of the garden debris was getting hauled away and composted at a commercial composting facility. At the same time many of the gardeners were in need of compost to replenish the soil. "So that was one of the priorities we set: to make the connection that the food that you take out of the garden has direct connection to the quality of what you put in the soil...And thus began all of these projects."

Starting with soil health, gardeners erected a four-bin compost structure at the center of the garden. On compost turning days, gardeners show up excited to put garden debris as well as personal food scraps in the fresh batch and lend a hand. In addition to developing infrastructure, Ruby organizes events at the garden like the monthly "Wine and Weed" evening during the summer, where gardeners are invited to share a glass of wine and weed together in the common areas of the gardens. Embarking on these garden projects that are both practical and inspiring has been key to keeping gardeners engaged. At Calahan Community Gardens, gardeners are willing to commit their time to garden work that serves the greater garden, not just their own production plots.

These special projects and events not only help to grow a healthy garden and get work done, but actively build community, give gardeners a sense of ownership and raise awareness of the importance of growing food and tending the Earth. Ruby has found that as a result gardeners spend leisure time at the garden with their families, friends, and even colleagues (like the time a gardener hosted a party at the garden for her co-workers). The culture of any community garden is shaped by the people who use the space. At Calahan Community Garden, Ruby and Andy's action-based vision and collective projects foster an active and engaged community of gardeners.

Images and profiles for the "Garden Organizers: Leaders for a New Season" series were created in summer 2017 by Claire Londagin for the Vermont Community Garden Network. This series features three community and school garden leaders as they prepare for a new season in the garden, providing fresh produce, teaching life skills, and strengthening local communities. These gardeners and their stories provide snapshots of the great impact Vermont garden leaders make in their communities and in the nearly 400 gardens they oversee across the state.

For more about the Vermont Community Garden Network, visit www.vcgn.org.

