2019 Thriving Gardens Grant Final Report

The Vermont Community Garden Network’s (VCGN) mission is to cultivate well-being by helping people of all ages grow food, build confidence, and connect with each other. We work with people in communities across Vermont to grow gardens where they live, work, learn and play, establishing and sustaining thriving gardens based on local solutions. We mobilize through community organizing, training, planning support, project funding, and hands-on garden education.

Our Thriving Gardens Grant program provides funding, training and planning assistance to move forward garden improvements and new garden start-ups, supporting the growth of thriving gardens across the state of Vermont.

“The Thriving Gardens Grant has allowed us to make major improvements that have greatly improved the experience of all, especially the children, who have visited our garden this season. We thank the Vermont Community Garden Network for recognizing and appreciating what we were trying to accomplish.”

– Pittsford Community Garden

A Snapshot of our Grantees:

15 Thriving Gardens Grantees

- 3 Community (individual plots +/- or shared space)
- 3 School (PreK-12, for school use only)
- 4 School/Community (school and community use)
- 1 Education (primary use education, not at a school)
- 2 Housing (for housing community residents)
- 1 Workplace (for employee use)
- 1 Other

- Centerpoint Staff Wellness Garden, Winooski
- Edible Brattleboro’s public sharing gardens, Brattleboro
- Gilman Senior Housing, Gliman
- Green Street School Garden, Brattleboro
- Highgate Public Library, Highgate Center
- Little Lambs Early Learning Center, Rutland
- Moose River Resident Garden, St. Johnsbury
- North Avenue Housing Co-op, Burlington
- Northfield Street Community Garden, Montpelier
- Oak Grove School Community Garden, Brattleboro
- Pittsford Community Garden at the Village Farm, Pittsford
- Rumney Memorial School Garden, Middlesex
- St. Johnsbury School Garden, St. Johnsbury
- Stamford VT School & Community Gardens (Stamford Vermont Seed Savers), Stamford
- Swanton Recreation Community Gardens, Swanton
Project Impact

Through activities and engagement at these 15 gardens, an estimated **1,400 people were impacted** over the course of the season, with an estimated **350 people directly involved** in the garden each week during the summer months. This includes people of all ages and backgrounds, including: children participating in summer programming (pre-K through high school-age) and their parents, families tending a garden plot, residents in affordable housing, community volunteers, and non-profit staff.

Some of the impacts from this season shared by our grantees:

“The children are going home asking parents to grow gardens next year and parents love seeing and hearing that children are trying and liking new vegetables.” – Little Lambs Early Learning Center

“I was particularly pleased by the enthusiasm the kids shared with their parents and grandparents. They showed and told what we had done, led tours around the garden space, shared recipes. The group was predominately boys and the first day. They were not sure they wanted to do "garden stuff”. A positive turn around, with possibilities of a lifelong interest.” – Highgate Public Library

“Now that we have 2 new beds, the families who visit our town's food shelf will also be benefited next season.”

– Rumney Memorial School Garden

“In a community that can often feel remote and/or isolating, this helped keep folks interested in something along with providing healthy food options.” – Gliman Senior Housing

“The teachers once starting school again have been saying how much they appreciate having this peaceful place with butterflies fluttering about....to take breaks during the day. People walking by continually stopped to share their appreciation. The teachers are bringing their classrooms out to collect Monarch caterpillars & release butterflies in the garden. The new Green Team is using the garden as well as a group of 6th graders who chose garden time once a week.”

– Green Street School Garden

“One community member with a plot was a first time gardener and had great success with her garden. She would come over to talk with me in the evenings when I was working on the garden and asked for advice on how to plant, weed and harvest. She was very pleased with her garden and grew beautiful eggplants!” – North Avenue Housing Co-op
In its first year, the grant program provided a total of $7,355 in funding, ranging from $200 to $800, as well as planning support for 14 community-based gardens. One new garden development project received planning support and secured their own funding. Matching funds were offered to encourage additional fundraising through VCGN’s online fundraising platform. Seven of the 15 gardens received special funding through VCGN’s Gardens for Learning program, a subset of the Thriving Gardens Grant that supports summer programs for children focuses on hands-on gardening, cooking and nutrition.

Grant funds were spent on:

- supplies and tools for youth summer programs
- materials for new raised beds
- stipends and supplies for community workshops
- picnic tables, benches, umbrellas, and arbors for adding shade, rest and inviting gathering spots
- bulletin boards and signage for communications
- fencing and garden gates for increasing access to gardeners and limiting access to garden pests
- wood chipper for creating mulch and weed whacker for controlling weeds
- irrigation system to increase ease of watering
- a new compost system for improving soil
- perennial plants to attract pollinators and more!

After making garden improvements, we heard:

“The garden became a more inviting place for children and their families. Less weeds (thanks to the weed whacker) and designated wood chip-paths through the garden made for better access. The kid-size picnic tables allowed for better work and resting spaces.” – Pittsford Community Garden

“Signage has improved participation, and the installation of a cattle panel archway added some additional interest and ability to grow more in a small vertical space.” – Edible Brattleboro

“All students and teachers at Rumney School have greatly benefited from the improved access entrance. Not only is it easier to find your way into the garden, this ease has increased the frequency that people go to the garden.” – Rumney Memorial School
Planning support was provided to grantees in the form of in-person visits, free admission to a regional networking and skills-building workshop (Grow It!), and phone and email support as needed. This assistance was a key component to helping grantees see through the success of their projects.

This is what grantees had to say about VCGN’s support:

“Libby was very supportive. She came in and helped with a day’s lesson, and the students were very engaged in it! One student just mentioned the lesson the other day. It is still having lasting impacts!” – St. Johnsbury School Garden

“All your support was wonderful this summer. Our plans changed and you all were more than willing to help at any turn in the road! Thank you!” – Little Lambs Early Learning Center

“The Grow It workshop was very helpful in that it allowed us to connect with individuals in nearby communities that were doing similar projects. It was great to hear what others were doing and know that we could look to others for support and ideas. Some of the exercises that we did also helped us to identify how we could better take advantage of the talents of those folks working with us.” – Pittsford Community Garden

“Libby was very helpful in identifying the best use for our grant money. We had plans to build a separate composting area outside the garden space. She convinced us this was not a wise expense. We utilized space within the garden and spent our money only on a larger composter, which was effective and basically odorless, so there was no need to segregate it.” – Northfield Street Community Garden
When applying, grantees were asked to identify key issues to improve through their project. Grantees were asked again at the end of the program: “How effectively were these key issues addressed?” The following graph indicates that collectively grantees were most impressed with the health of their gardens and gardener accessibility, met expectations for most of the key issues, and need improvement in communications and somewhat in community building and education/learning opportunities.

**Lessons Learned**

In their final report grantees were asked to reflect on the season’s challenges and lessons learned.

The most common theme found was that many garden groups found it difficult to find, coordinate, and retain volunteers to help with projects at key times (i.e. when building beds). A few grantee ideas for future work with volunteers: 1) remember the “off-season” and start planning/preparing projects early; 2) find incentives to get people interested; and 3) have regular check-ins with gardeners/volunteers.

We also heard from a couple of grantees that attendance in summer programming was low, lower than they hoped for and expected. Lessons learned were to be flexible and know that the summer program can be casual, and also that it’s worthwhile to re-think program design based on outcomes, such as planning for fewer sessions for a higher turnout and impact.

Additionally, an alarming number of grantee groups—six out of 15—experienced a change in the project leadership mid-way through the season (i.e. staff leaving, health challenges, etc.) that presented some challenges in successfully completing the projects. These changes are an inevitable part of project work, but the question arises: What redundancies can we create so that the success of a project does not rely on a single individual, but on the strength of the garden’s organizing capacity? And what role can the Thriving Gardens Grant Program play in that?
Resources Needed
When asked about resources their garden needs to be successful we heard that grantees desired:

- continued grant funding, esp. for sites with summer programs;
- more and more consistent volunteers;
- access or tips on how to source free or reduced cost materials;
- and other systems and materials, such as irrigation, educational materials, a list of local workshop presenters, research on hoop houses, website support, and more networking opportunities.

Looking Forward:
In its first year, the Thriving Gardens Grant Program impacted 15 unique and diverse garden communities and educational spaces across the state of Vermont. Grantees were provided with a support structure for their projects this season that not only funded materials and educational costs, but helped groups determine how to maximize the funds available and plan for the long term success of their garden endeavors. After reflecting on outcomes from the 2019 grant program we suggest focusing on personalized support for next year’s program, including the following improvements.

- **Start with an initial phone meeting to determine the planning/technical support most needed to pull off a successful project**, rather than an initial spring site visit to every grantee. For some grantees we might determine an in-person site assessment is needed, others might seek advice on design, and yet others ask for support in later in the season for a special work project.

- **Reduce the number of grantees** so that VCGN has the capacity to personalize support and best meet each garden’s unique needs.

- **Include matching funds and/or crowdfunding as an upfront option for garden fundraising**. This could be either as an additional part of the grant application or as a separate offering. Several grantees took advantage of an option for matching funds and where impressed by the outpouring of support from their communities. As one grantee put it: “This was extremely helpful in terms of what we could accomplish in the garden, but also inspiring for future projects as another way to raise money.”

- **Require two grant point-people to be listed in the application**, as well as continue to promote team participation in meetings and workshops. This gets at the challenge of project leadership turnover and begins to encourage systems for redundancy and growing organizational capacity.

- **Address common challenges at early, such as communications and volunteer recruitment and scheduling**. Encourage early planning and scheduling of building projects, model strong garden communications, and provide planning support where needed.

- **Open up a platform for sharing among grantees**, for such resources as activity/lesson plans, workshop presenters, and design plans. In the past, Gardens for Learning grantees appreciated access to a shared Google Drive folder for swapping activity and recipe ideas.