VCGN 2019 Programs Impact Report

The state's 500+ community and school gardens serve tens of thousands of people and are a source of fresh, healthy food for Vermonters of all ages, backgrounds, and incomes. Gardens in neighborhoods, at schools, housing sites, food shelves, and senior centers are more than simply places for youth and adults to grow food. They are rich learning environments that increase food literacy, build community connections, and foster civic engagement.

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. Learn more at www.vcgn.org.

2019 in Review – A Snapshot of VCGN’s Programs

“VCGN brings us to life each week as we learn to bring the earth alive with flowers, fruit, vegetables and herbs that WE, as a community, grow and share with others.” - Susan Herrick, Director of Resident Engagement, Ethan Allen Residence

- VCGN provided direct support for more than 480 people—community garden coordinators, garden educators, housing staff and residents, school staff and students, and gardeners of all ages—through season-long garden education classes, workshops for garden leaders, garden support and more. The leadership, education, grant and technical assistance delivered by VCGN ultimately impacted tens of thousands of Vermonters.

- Over the course of the 2019 season, an estimated 206 people participated in local hands-on garden education programs through an estimated 345 hours of one-time or multiple-session workshops and season-long classes, as a part of adult beginner gardening classes, intergenerational and senior gardening programs, and gardening support at affordable housing sites and workplaces.

- VCGN staff delivered 13 capacity-building workshops and networking events for more than 192 people supporting the work of an estimated 95 community-based gardens and related groups in Vermont and around the country. This took place through garden leader gatherings, a youth gardening symposium, school and early care garden workshops, and as a part of a statewide conference.

- Through two grant programs—VCGN's Thriving Gardens Grant and Vermont Agency of Agriculture’s Farm to School and Child Nutrition Grant—VCGN provided training, site visits, and technical support for 22 new and existing garden groups; engaging thousands of beginner and experienced gardeners at affordable housing sites, public libraries, schools, early care centers, workplaces, community gardens, and recreation centers.
VCGN – Now & Looking Forward

Although there are food security programs in Vermont that help bring food to families, there is no other organization focused on gardens and related education where people live, learn, work and play. Simply providing gardening space is not enough! Our combination of skill development, nutrition education, community resources and in-person assistance is equipping people of all ages and cultures to grow some of their own healthy food. What we do and who we serve:

Hunger Prevention & Food Justice

- Gardens for Learning: families & children at risk of summer hunger
- Thriving Gardens Grants: underserved & diverse populations
- Affordable Housing Sites: low income residents and families
- Family Room Garden: children and New American families

Education & Wellness

- Teaching Gardens: new & experienced adult gardeners
- Grow It!: leaders of shared garden spaces throughout Vermont
- Green Thumbs at Work: workers in employee wellness programs
- Horticulture Therapy: seniors & veterans in assisted living facilities
- LEAP: blind and visually impaired young adults in job skills training

In 2019 we implemented a new three year strategic plan outlining strategies to expand programs and broaden resource delivery, while working to lessen reliance on foundation funding by building a new approach to development. This year we expanded our statewide work and partnerships, increased capacity, and improved programs to be more consistent. We have a solid team delivering high-impact education, garden development and critical leadership support. This work helps thousands of children and adults gain important skills, confidence, and social connections, and we are confident we can continue to strengthen not only our program delivery and network, but the financial diversification and stability needed to grow.

We are working strategically to increase our statewide impact through targeted program expansion and have identified more garden education in communities and housing sites as a significant need. There is a tremendous opportunity to improve the health of many families by implementing programs at more sites, and the development of a training and support structure will multiply our capacity to do so. We are committed to the creation of a scalable and sustainable model allowing us to fulfill calls for increased support. Specific goals for growth over the next year include:

- Serve 5% of Vermont kids living in food insecure households (885 children)
- Double programs at affordable housing sites (15 in a minimum of 3 counties)
- Pilot a Healthcare Learning Garden for patients that can be replicated at other hospitals
- Increase outreach, partnership development & resource delivery outside Chittenden County with the launch of our Ambassador program and through re-rebranding efforts

We believe the many positives of gardening can help heal people and planet, with improved physical health, lower stress and anxiety, physical activity, social connections and huge environmental benefits. Thank you for your support.
WORKSHOPS & NETWORKING EVENTS FOR GARDEN LEADERS AND EDUCATORS

Grow It! Workshops

VCGN’s Grow It! workshops returned this spring to seven locations regionally across the state of Vermont. This year’s workshops on “Growing a Community of Gardeners” equipped 78 community-based gardeners, organizers and community advocates with training and tools for improving coordination and management of more than 46 community-based gardens. Through collaborative learning, we explored:

- How can you tap into your garden community’s unique knowledge, skills and resources?
- What are sustainable strategies for shared leadership and engagement in your garden community?

Thanks for being a space for bringing people together and keeping the pulse of community gardening happenings!”

“I’m even more excited now to get a workplace community garden started!”

School Garden Workshops & Planning Support

VCGN was contracted by the Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets (VAAFM) to organize and facilitate five regional workshops and planning sessions for school garden champions (two of these workshops were held as a part of VCGN’s Grow It! Workshops). These sessions focused building the capacity and coordination of VAAFM’s 2019 Vermont Farm-to-School Grantees and their garden programs. In addition to grantees, all workshops welcomed other community members and school teams, reaching a total of 72 garden leaders from 21 different schools and early care centers from across Vermont.

“We are taking so much helpful information away with us. The resources shown are particularly exciting.”

“It’s always great to meet up with other folks who share this interest. I feel less panicky than when I came in!”

As a part of VCGN’s garden services contract, we also visited four of the seven grantee teams for an additional two hours of planning and technical support from VCGN for their garden program.

Teachers, farmers, parents, directors, and others involved with sites providing services for early childhood gathered in Rutland
BACG Site Leader Spring Meetup

Twenty-five garden site coordinators representing 14 Burlington Area Community Gardens (BACG) gathered for a spring orientation and site leader meet-up. Participants shared resources and discussed opportunities, challenges and solutions for building gardener engagement at community gardens.

Youth Gardening Symposium

Our April “Get Up and Grow” Youth Gardening Symposium was a free collaborative event put on by VCGN, KidsGardening, Common Roots, and Charlie Nardozzi, and hosted by Dealer.com. The event gathered 23 youth gardening coordinators, educators, and farmers representing 14 youth garden programs, mostly in Chittenden County. The evening included discussions with gardening experts, time for planning, and resource sharing.

NOFA-VT Winter Conference

This year we facilitated two workshops at the NOFA-VT Winter Conference, February 16 & 17:

- A panel discussion explored community food scrap composting, with compost stewards from three community gardens—The Garden at 485 Elm in Montpelier, Calahan Community Garden in Burlington, and Ludlow Area Community Garden in Ludlow.

- A hands-on workshop on “Growing and Dyeing: Our Favorite Plants for a Dye Garden.” A presentation featured detailed information on growth and use of dye plants, followed by questions, participant input, and a chance for everyone to try out some natural dyeing.

GARDEN GRANT PROGRAM: Thriving Gardens

This year’s grant program provided a funding, training and planning assistance to move forward garden improvements and new garden start-ups for 15 garden grantees, including seven Gardens for Learning sites (youth summer gardening, cooking, nutrition programs). Through activities and engagement at these gardens, an estimated 1,400 people were impacted this season.

>v Gardener at Stamford School simulate a farmer's market

“[In a community that can often feel isolating, this helped keep folks interested in something along with providing healthy food options.”] – Gliman Senior Housing installed new elevated raised beds
During make and take lessons, students turn garden harvest into delicious food!

“Overall, LOVE this course! This garden is my happy place. Thank you!” – CTG Student

**Community Teaching Garden Course**

We hosted our **22-week long organic gardening course** at the Ethan Allen Community Teaching Garden with 15 students ranging in age from 25 to 79 years old. This year was a **transitional season for the CTG site at Tommy Thompson**. Due to limited enrollment, we decided to cancel the advanced course and designate the space as a community partnership garden. In collaboration with Feeding Chittenden, at least two-thirds of the garden was planted with crops that were eventually donated to the food shelf. Moving forward, Burlington Area Community Gardens will be managing the Tommy Thompson garden space and has plans to pilot a collective gardening program.

**Community Teaching Garden Course**

**The Janet S. Munt Family Room Garden**

For 2019 programming, the Janet S. Munt Family Room secured funding to hire VCGN to coordinate a **12-week long garden education program**. The Family Room’s commitment to fund our work is a testament to the strength of our partnership and the relevance of our garden education programming. In addition to providing technical support for new gardeners, we dedicated many activity days to turning the harvest into nourishing food. Hands-on cooking lessons designed for all ages to participate and sharing tips for cooking with young children was of particular interest to parents and Family Room staff.

**Horticultural Therapy for Seniors at the Ethan Allen Residence**

Our horticultural therapy programming at the Ethan Allen Residence significantly expanded this season with new collaborations and a request to run year-round garden-based programming. From June to August, we facilitated 12 weekly sessions to engage seniors in hands-on gardening and cooking activities. A highlight of the summer was an intergenerational collaboration with the Boys and Girls Club whereby three 9-year olds visited the Residence to help seniors harvest produce and then sell items at the Old North End Farmers Market. Once the growing season ended, we moved activities indoors to continue with a 10-week long fall session with activities such as growing microgreens under grow lights and packaging herbal tea mixes for holiday gifts.
Champlain Housing Trust Garden Support

Through our contract with Champlain Housing Trust, we provided garden support for seven affordable housing sites, benefiting 103 households in Chittenden County. The 7-month long contract included over 100 contact hours. We piloted a comprehensive support program for each site that included coordinating garden opening and closing days, two hands-on food preservation workshops, bi-monthly technical support hours, and editing a bi-monthly garden newsletter for residents. Our work will continue in 2020 with a few revisions to best accommodate resident interests and staff capacity at VCGN.

“\textit{I really loved all the help, the check-ins, the onsite assistance, and the free plants make a huge difference.}” - Maple Tree Place resident

LEAP Program for Blind and Visually Impaired Youth

We initiated a new partnership with the LEAP Program that provides blind and visually impaired youth the opportunity to gain the skills needed to become independent, confident, and productive with the outcome of increased employability. With this goal in mind, we facilitated summer work based experiences for 16 youth who dedicated six 8-hour work days to support VCGN’s garden maintenance needs. Working with blind and visually impaired youth gave us the welcome opportunity to refine our garden educator toolbox in order to create meaningful, high impact, and skill-level appropriate activities for a vulnerable population.

Lunch & Learn Workshops for Employees

We facilitated seven two-hour long “Lunch & Learn” workshops for employees of three businesses in the Burlington area. We continued our partnership with Charlie Nardozzi for the rooftop gardens at Dealer.com with series of six hands-on workshops. In early spring and summer we visited Burton headquarters to provide technical support for setting up their indoor grow lights and facilitated a two two-hour long workshops on seed starting and garden maintenance and pest management. In May we facilitated a 1.5-hour long “lunch & learn” workshop on garden design for employees at PedsOne, a pediatric billing company in Winooski.

Agroecology & Livelihoods Collaborative at UVM

VCGN is one of four research partners in the ‘Performance of Agroecological Principles in Urban/Peri-urban Agriculture in Burlington VT’ USDA Hatch Award, coordinated by the Agroecology & Livelihoods Collaborative at the University of Vermont. VCGN has committed to providing support for field research activities with sites managed with Champlain Housing Trust, through 2021. In collaboration with two UVM research professors, we put on a community engagement event for residents at two affordable housing sites to gather feedback on resident priorities.
GARDEN CONSULTING: Housing Vermont

In partnership with Housing Vermont, VCGN staff led affordable housing site assessments in Addison and Washington Counties with Addison County Community Trust and Downstreet Housing. Also, in Rutland, VCGN staff facilitated garden management training for housing staff and residents. These activities in Addison and Washington Counties were in preparation for new garden development and a collaborative pilot project to launch in 2020.

GARDEN COMMUNITY WORKDAYS: Day in the Dirt

On April 27th, more than 400 volunteers gathered at community and school gardens across the state of Vermont to help prepare them for the growing season. In 2019 this statewide day of service and fundraising event supported projects at 28 Day in the Dirt sites and raised more than $6,000 for our Thriving Gardens and Gardens for Learning grant programs.

RESOURCES FOR GARDENS

Seeds for Gardens

VCGN distributed more than 4000 seed packets donated by High Mowing Organic Seeds to more than 140 garden groups, serving tens of thousands of youth and adult gardeners as across the state.

Burlington Seed Swap

Approximately 120 people of all ages attended our free community event celebrating the upcoming gardening season which brought gardeners together to share seeds, garden stories, and resources. This annual event is held the first Saturday of March at the Fletcher Free Library in Burlington.

SUMMER INTERNSHIPS

We are extremely grateful for the dedication and support provided by three seasonal interns that allowed VCGN to run robust garden education programs with such diverse populations. Kasydi Dunaway joined us for a 2-month long Food Access Internship through the Shepherd Consortium partnership. Kristen Wirkkala received academic credit for her 3-month long internship working at affordable housing sites and with our horticultural therapy program. And Isabella Alessandrini joined our team for a 5-month long internship to support the Community Teaching Garden Course. Thank you to all three!