2019 Grow It! Report

Vermont Community Garden Network’s (VCGN) Grow It! program provides training and networking for the many and diverse individuals who manage and coordinate the roughly 500 shared growing spaces (community-based gardens) in Vermont. Workshops are hosted at locations around the state and include training on garden leadership (i.e. working with volunteers, community engagement, project management), sharing of best practices and tools, group planning, and a garden tour.

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

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?

What participants valued from the workshops:

Networking with a COMMUNITY of garden leaders.

❖ “People with expertise and openness to assisting others”
❖ “Learning that others have challenges like ours!”
❖ “Being around others with similar interests got me enthused about the upcoming season!”

Sharing new and interesting IDEAS.

❖ “Coming away feeling pumped up about new ideas”
❖ “Great seeing examples from other gardens around the state as examples of best practices”

Building a unique set of SKILLS.

❖ “Learned about organizational skills that I never related to gardening”
❖ “The importance of listening to others for building a successful gardening program”
❖ “It was great to explore shared leadership as a reminder to ask for help”

Planning, brainstorming and processing TIME.

❖ “It was just a great time for our team to be together”
❖ “The relaxed atmosphere to problem solve and gain information.”

Going home with TOOLS to support our work.

❖ “The asset assessment tool will be very helpful as we work through how we might connect more with the community.”
❖ “Community Garden Sustainability Survey was very helpful for assessing strengths and weaknesses”
Who came together

In our sixth year of the program, we saw an increase in new participants—with more than 80% attending Grow It! for the first time (up from 67% in 2017). Workshop participants came as representatives to a wide range of garden types—community gardens located on town and private land, gardens associated with schools, early care centers, non-profit institutions, affordable housing, senior care homes, workplaces, and hospitals. Additionally, staff from governmental and non-profit groups attended to gather tools for their work and to lend support to garden groups in their area. And individual community members—Master Gardeners, food access advocates, and people who just wanted to lend a hand—came to see how they could get involved.

“Made me feel very grateful to be part of a community garden.”

How it went

In addition to drawing the broader public, this year’s workshops served as training and planning time for grantees from two different programs: VCGN’s Thriving Gardens Grant and Vermont Agency of Agriculture Food and Markets’ (VAAFM) Farm to School and Child Nutrition Grant. This was an ideal time for grantee teams to gain tools for working collaboratively, assess gaps for seeking additional support, and put their heads together to do some real planning.

- In Bennington, a VAAFM grantee team from Head Start/Early Start brought 13 educators from three sites, for a coordinated approach to planning.
- In St. Albans both VAAFM grantee teams found new team members at the workshop—gardeners interested in getting involved with a project.
- In Barton, a VCGN grantee working solo found the moral support and brainstorm power she needed to dive in and work on recruiting the help she needed.

We also saw...

- Seven groups attended with the intention of launching new gardens, at workplaces (at an international corporation and a school district office), early care and schools, and a demonstration site. These attendees were eager to sit down with established groups and seasoned garden leaders to gather tips for getting started.

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

- The Rutland workshop marked a first time meeting for the new crew of site leaders for Rutland’s Recreation and Parks Department.
- In Norwich, the group spent time ‘workshopping’ the hosting community garden that was having infrastructure and participation issues. The host and participants commented that they found the process of examining what wasn’t working just as valuable as hearing about ‘best practices.’
- Workshop participants gathered in unique spaces and learned about model programs: an educational greenhouse space, a senior living home, a seed library, hospital gardens, and more!

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Thoughts for the future...

Hungry for resources...

People love templates and tools to help them get their work done and not have to reinvent the wheel! That’s one of the things that VCGN does best—connecting people to the best tools and examples we can find out there, or creating them ourselves! Participants were very excited to discover VCGN web resources. A few ideas that we hope to develop or have already started on: a list for locally accessing people who have garden expertise, best sourcing for garden materials, garden newsletter samples, examples of garden signs, and gardener handbook/welcome packet template. We plan to continue to share these resources through our website, monthly newsletter, Facebook page, and future workshops.

Revisiting the old and bringing in the new...

When asked about topics they want to get more training on, participants brought up topics we’ve covered in past Grow It! workshops and topics that have only been slightly addressed in the past. Two popular past topics that people would like us to return to: 1) recruiting and retaining volunteers and 2) increasing community involvement and interest. Two topics that we could spend more time addressing specifically: 1) more technical information on gardening practices (pest management and weed control are high on the list) and fundraising for your garden.

Desire to connect...

The number one reason we hear from people as to why they value Grow It! is the opportunity to connect with others doing this work. As one attendee put it simply, when asked what other resources they needed: “I want to visit other gardens and attend more workshops.” Clearly Grow It! serves an important role in the development and success of garden communities. Since Grow It! currently only comes once a year, it is crucial that we continue to seek ways to promote this connection throughout the year. For example:

- We are currently assessing our remote communication tools. Use of our closed Facebook group is limited, but people continue to ask for a tool that will support communication between garden leaders and the remote sharing of ideas and resources across the state. We are exploring a community-based garden forum as one possible solution.
- But remote, online tools won’t get people everything they’re looking for in terms of connection. People want to connect face-to-face, they want to visit each other’s gardens, and in several areas they’ve expressed an interest in building regional mini-networks. We have just launched a new Vermont Garden Network Ambassador program—individual Ambassadors located around the state to serve as local advocates for community-based gardening and as an additional connection between VCGN and local garden groups. Each Ambassador will be tasked with organizing a regional event to promote connection between area gardens (i.e. gardens tour, harvest event, etc.)—an important step towards deepening connection and building networks in areas across the state.

“So well organized and structured. Appreciate the facilitation of community members. Pace and content of information was fresh and informative.”

“Everyone was so willing to share info, experiences and resources. Great opportunity for my team to sit down together. I am looking forward to connecting with some of the workshop attendees and with you, too.”

THANK YOU! Grow It! is made possible thanks to the generous support of our sponsors: Gardener’s Supply, Mascoma Bank, the Northwestern Medical Center, RiseVT, and the Vermont Country Store.