



2024 Final Report for Champlain Housing Trust

Growing Food, Growing Community at Affordable Housing Sites



Gardeners holding harvest & herb infused salt from a monthly workshop (left) and planting donated starts (center & left).

Program Description

Growing Food, Growing Community (GFGC) is a food access and garden education program of the Vermont Garden Network (VGN). Our goal is to support residents living at affordable housing units to access fresh produce through hands-on gardening. VGN partners with Champlain Housing Trust (CHT) and offers guidance on garden bed design; provides plant starts, seeds, and tools; and conducts season-long workshops to bring together resident gardeners as they learn how to grow, and process, their fresh garden harvests.

From March through October, VGN managed programming for 132 gardeners across nine CHT properties:

1. Avenue Apartments, Burlington
2. Brookside, Colchester
3. Fort Ethan Allen, Colchester
4. Garden Apartments, South Burlington
5. Green Street, Hinesburg
6. Harrington Village, Shelburne
7. Maple Tree Place, Williston
8. South Meadow, South Burlington
9. Stuart Avenue, Colchester
10. Susan's Place, Essex (one off container gardening workshop)

The GFGC program is managed by Angela deBettencourt, VGN's Garden Education Manager, who oversees a team of three Garden Coordinators to serve a total of 21 affordable housing sites in Chittenden, Windsor, Addison and Washington counties. Audrey Tasse-Ayer served as the Chittenden County Garden Coordinator to support all nine CHT sites. The Garden Coordinator's position is seasonal part-time, averaging 10 hours per week, with more hours needed during peak gardening months of May, June and October. The Garden Coordinator is responsible for:

- Site Assessments and gathering gardener contacts
- Facilitating garden orientation, open/ closing days, June planting days, and the Veducation Van visit
- Delivering material resources such as plants, seeds, compost, tools
- Delivering educational opportunities through monthly workshops and bi-monthly garden newsletters
- Communicating with gardeners around bed assignments, garden related questions/concerns
- Communicating with CHT's property managers and resident engagement manager

Audrey returned as the Chittenden County Garden Coordinator for a second year in a row which has greatly increased the success of this program. At a recent VGN staff meeting, Audrey shared these words on the importance of staffing continuity:

"I think returning to this position for a second year with the knowledge I gained from last year has also really worked in favor of a more successful season! Having formed relationships with the gardeners, I have been more able to cater programming to their interests and advocate for their needs."



Audrey conducted site assessments in late winter (left) and delivered compost in early spring (right)

Residents also benefited from having Audrey as their Garden Coordinator for a second year in a row. In their words:

"Dear Garden Network, I am writing this note to let you know how much I appreciate Audrey's help in the garden with getting soil and extra plants and also giving us workshops. Some things can be difficult to grow so it's always great to get help."

- Resident at Maple Tree Place

"Audrey Tasse-Ayer has been a standout among the garden coordinators we've had. She's been a fine leader, partner, and coach to all of us. Her workshops are well-prepared and she's supportive, friendly, and clearly passionate about empowering people to grow their own food. We hope there's more of Audrey in our future!" - Resident at Fort Ethan Allen

Program Assessment



More photos of gardeners who partake in this programming. ADA accessible beds (left & center) are necessary at many sites.

VGN successfully completed all program deliverables as detailed in the program contract. Due to staffing changes at CHT, VGN took on additional unforeseen responsibilities from March to mid June, including garden bed assignments and gardener agreements. Upon Suey Howe's arrival as the new CHT Resident Engagement Manager, we experienced a notable shift in ongoing communication, follow-up and overall coordination of the GFGC program in close partnership with the VGN team.

Attendance

Garden Coordinators record attendance at all scheduled events as a way to track resident participation and accurately inform programming decisions. One of the biggest challenges of this season has been resident participation, which we saw reflected across all events, and at all sites. Audrey fulfilled her responsibilities to spread the word about upcoming events through emails, phone calls, text messages, and flyers. Additionally, she responded to frequent requests for shifting activity times to late evenings and weekends in order to accommodate resident schedules.

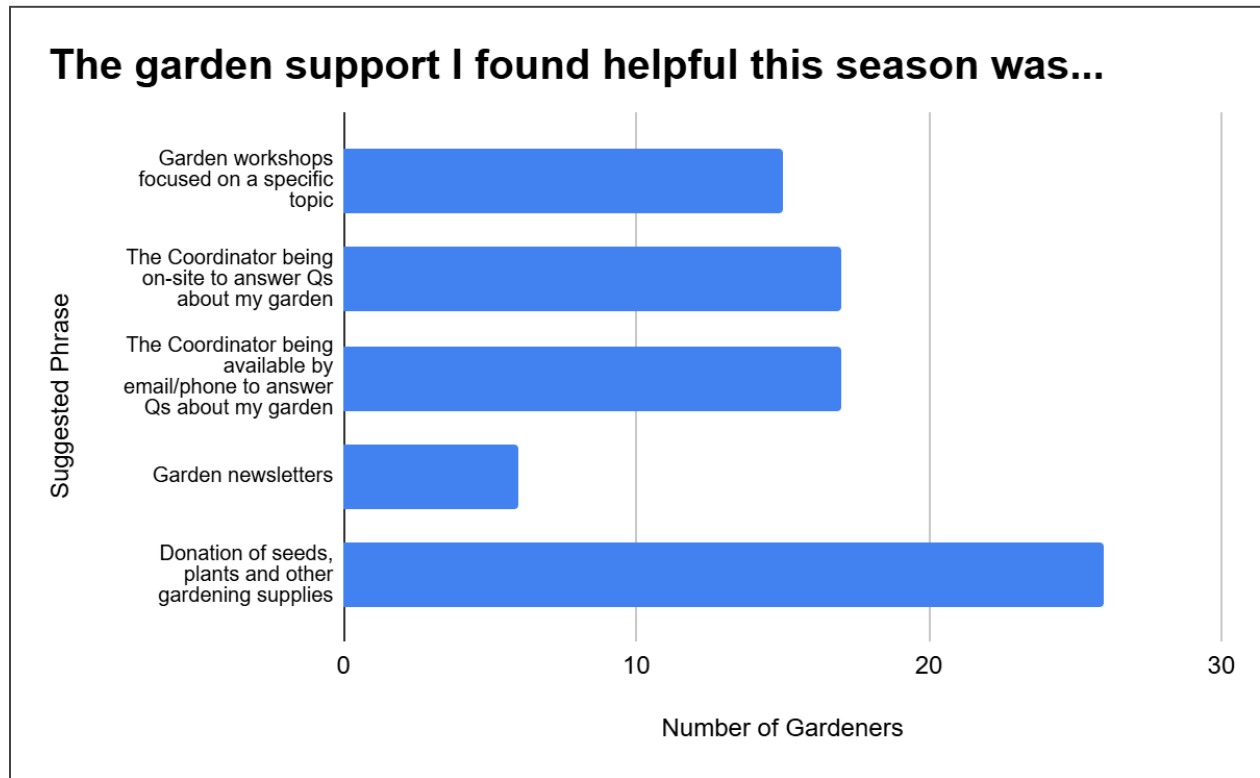
Participation rates shown below reflect average attendance numbers from data compiled at the following events at each site: garden planning session, garden opening days, planting days, workshops, Veducation Van visits and garden closing days. Of those events, garden opening days in May saw the highest participation percentage with 69% of residents across all nine sites attending the event. Similarly, the planting day in June attracted 61% of residents. We believe this is likely due to the excitement at the beginning of the gardening season and the access to free plants and seeds.

CHT Property	Average Participation %
Brookside	69
Garden Apartments	54
Stuart	53
South Meadow	38
Avenue	33
Fort Ethan Allen	31
Green Street	30
Harrington Village	20
Maple Tree Place	14

Resident Gardener Experiences

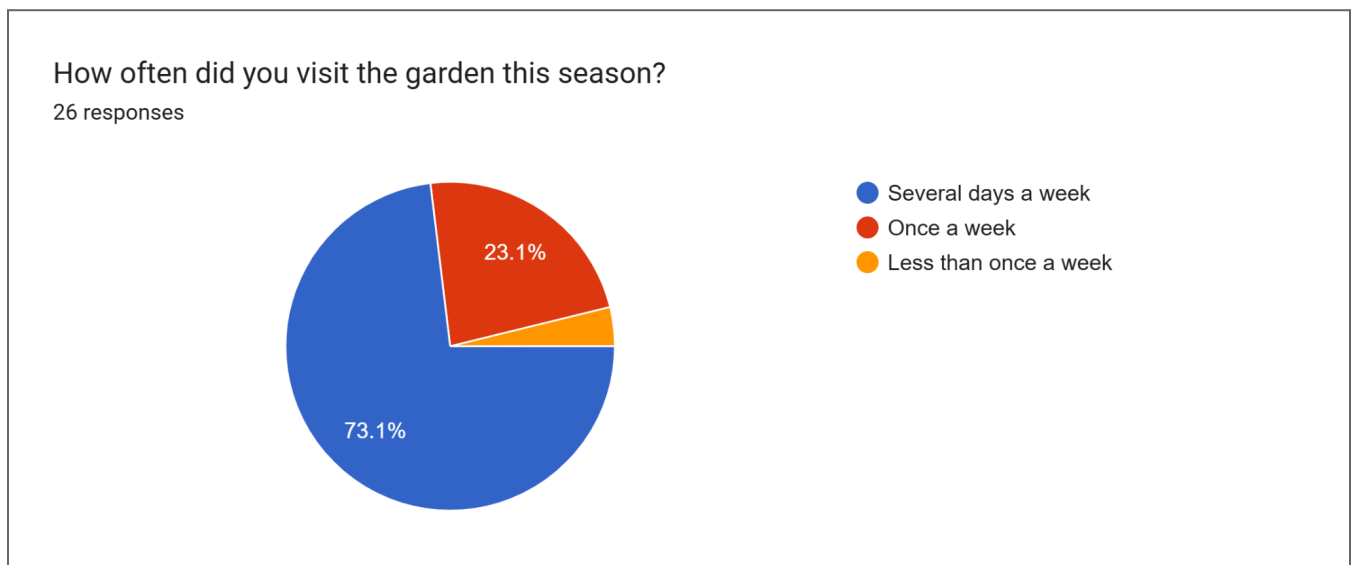
In early October, Audrey distributed printed copies and shared a digital version of VGN's end-of-season resident gardener survey. The following graphs and charts summarize the responses we received from a total of 26 residents.

Out of all of VGN's offerings, residents reported that technical assistance provided by the Garden Coordinator and donations of material goods were the most helpful garden supports.

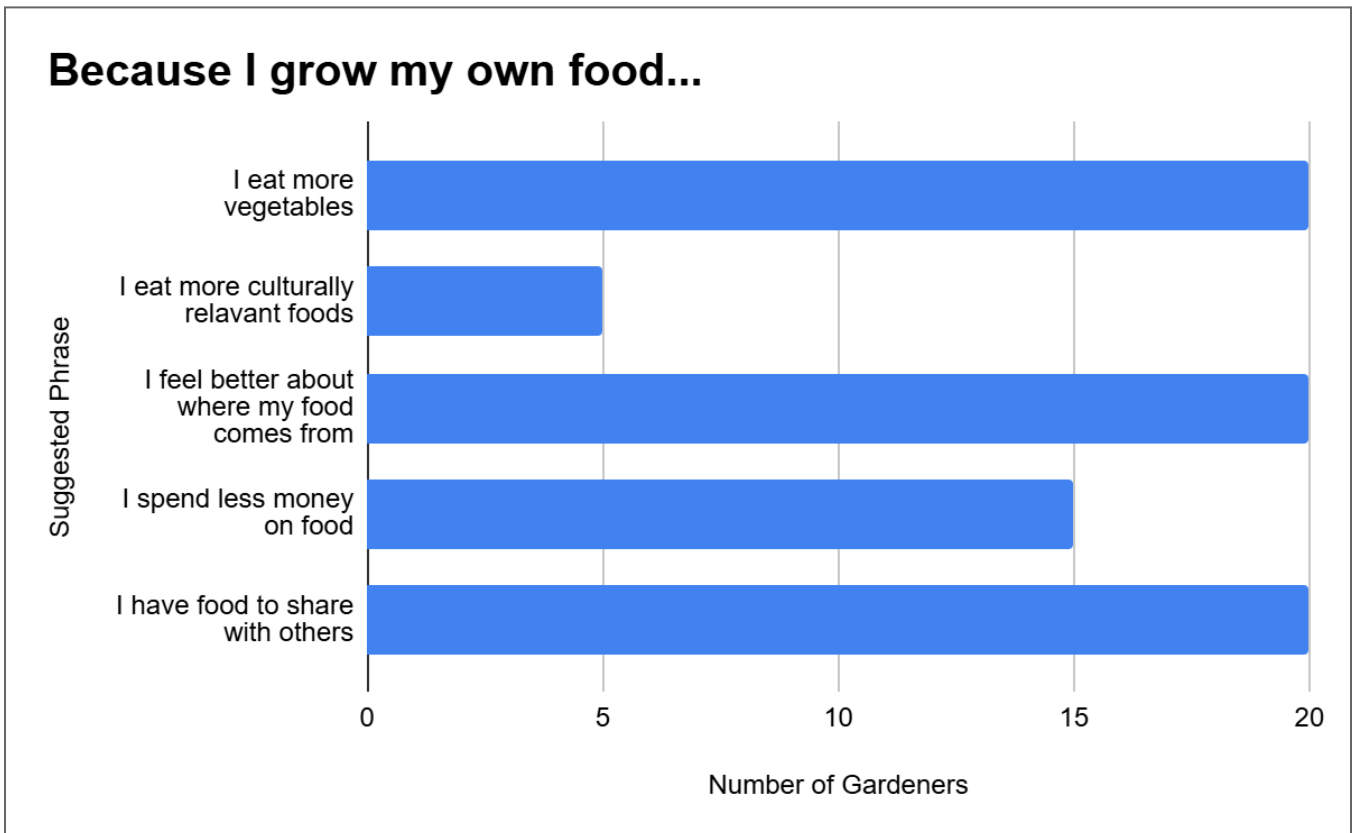
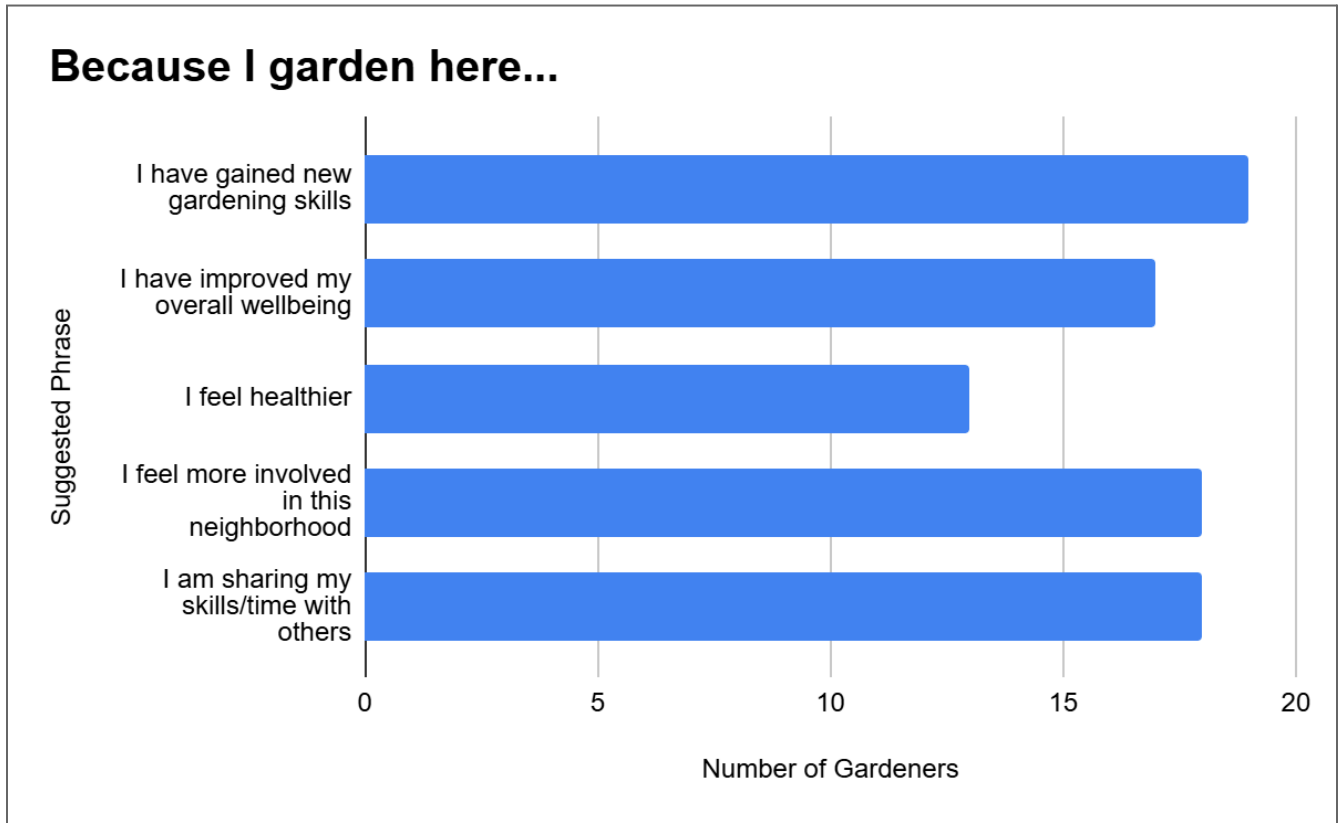


Overall, gardeners reported experiencing many positive benefits from gardening this season with 76% reporting that the garden impacted their wellbeing a 5 out of 5. The following graphs and testimonies provide a more detailed picture of how this program impacted resident gardeners.

It is encouraging to know that residents visited their gardens quite often:

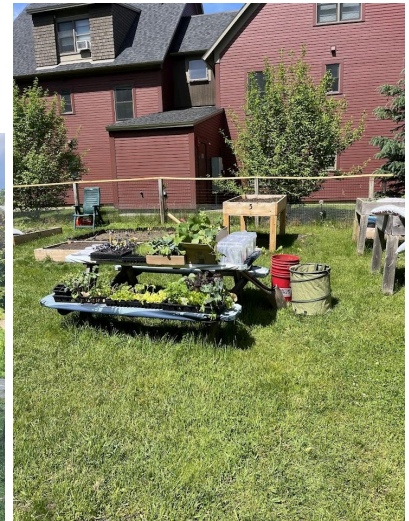


Two central goals of the GFGC program are to create and sustain opportunities for residents to build community through gardening and to increase access to land and fresh produce. Reviewing these survey results, it is evident that we have indeed achieved these goals



Testimonies

Direct testimonies from resident gardeners tended to fall into four recurring themes: community building, food & land access, overall gratitude, and constructive feedback. We organized the most relevant and insightful comments from resident surveys into those themes.



Donation table at Garden Apartments (left), herb salt workshop with kids (center) and plant donations at Harrington (right)

Community Building

"One of the things I enjoy most is seeing old friends out in their gardens, meeting new gardeners, seeing what they grow, and swapping stories & recipes. It's fun and inspirational to see all the different ways people set up their plots, and how much food they can produce. My neighbor has 3 kids who I've known since they were babies; every spring they're a year older and during the summer they all come to the garden to help out & play. It's a lovely way to stay connected." - Resident at Fort Ethan Allen

Food & Land Access

"I love my little garden so much, and I feel so grateful that even though my family lives in an apartment, we're still able to have a garden nearby. I have a one year old and it's a fun and important part of our daily routine to go visit the garden and see what's blooming. There are so many things that she learns by helping me in the garden." -Resident at Harrington Village

"[...] I planted cucumbers and zucchini and they did not do well. However, I did have good luck with string beans, lettuce, tomatoes, a couple of green peppers, and eggplant. [...] I normally plant dill, cilantro, rosemary, basil and oregano in small pots on my porch. I saw some of those herbs that people planted in the garden beds grow large so next year I would like to grow herbs in a garden bed. [...]" -Resident at Maple Tree Place

Gratitudes

"Me and my children have LOVED having our own little garden and having my children watch things grow. I'm very thankful for the opportunity to have our own garden this year! Thank you for all that you do for the community and I apologize we haven't had a chance to meet yet!" - Resident at Avenue

" [...] I'm so happy to be able to have a garden and get my hands in the dirt."-
Resident at Garden Apartments

"Thank you Audrey and the VT Garden Network for providing the garden beds, dirt and compost. [...] Thank you Audrey for the opportunity to grow some food this year. It has been a great opportunity and I really appreciate it." -Resident at Maple Tree Place

Constructive Feedback

One gardener at Brookside had a few direct requests such as opportunities to plant perennials, fall crops, establish a compost system and add more beds accessible to other parts of the property.

Residents at Harrington Village had a lot of feedback to share about the new beds this year. In their words:

"I will most likely not garden next year. The environment and lack of communication. I'm done with the wait and see what they are going to do next especially when the needs and interests of gardeners are ignored. Also the guys that mow out there are careless. [...]"

"This was my sixth season having a garden plot in the community garden at Harrington Village. I have always enjoyed gardening and this plot has brought me much joy each year. This spring changes were made to the garden that have damaged my experience with it. [...] The beds used to be 9 feet x 4 feet. They are now 4 feet x 2 feet. They are less than half their previous size. This is discouraging because I am not able to grow even half of what I could in previous seasons. I missed having the space to grow the full assortment of flowers and vegetables I used to be able to grow. What made this more aggravating is that they removed all of the soil from the beds, mixed everything all together, and then redistributed it back into them. This meant that I no longer have the soil I have worked on/with all these years. What made it worse is that many beds had mint and or other weed infestations and by stirring everything together, they filled each bed with a weedy mixture that sprouted up a whole bunch of nasty things as everything started to grow. It took me over an hour to sift through the soil in my bed to remove all of the weeds and then try to remake the soil."

"If CHT wants to make improvements to the garden, I wish they would consult the garden users and ask for our input before making decisions on what to do [...]"



Examples of different garden layouts: Fort Ethan Allen (left) and Brookside (right)

Site Specific

The site specific notes below capture information about each site, including: participation, successes, challenges and suggestions for next year. These notes are in addition to those shared in the mid season report.

Housing Site	Site Specific Notes
<p>Avenue Apartments</p>	<p>Avenue is a small site with minimal engagement from gardeners. All of the beds were used to some degree this year, but many folks stopped tending as much later in the season. Beds here are old and the soil is depleted. All of the beds would benefit from repairs and replenishing of compost rich soil. This site could also use more ADA compliant beds and has some accessibility issues that could be given attention to. Gardeners here are not very engaged with workshops, but do overall seem to really appreciate having beds.</p>
<p>Stuart</p>	<p>This was the first year that programming has been run at Stuart and overall I'd say it was a success! Though only a handful of gardeners participated in workshops, those that did were very engaged, eager to learn, and eager to share and help each other. Some considerations for next year include: how to assign beds (there's more interest than there are beds, so perhaps a lottery system again), and options for sharing singular beds (split in half) or creating a shared bed for shared crops. Gardeners here are really interested in maximizing the space they have. They'd love to have the option to do container gardening in addition to the beds as well.</p>
<p>Brookside</p>	<p>This site has a history of major interpersonal conflict, but thankfully that was not very present this year. Beds were installed very late in the season, so only a small handful of gardeners chose to use them. Those that did seemed to really appreciate the garden and got a good crop! Gardeners here would love to have a compost system again (they used to have a nice one) and to reinstate their old rain barrel. Next year, it would be good to do more outreach to see if more folks are interested in gardening again, and if so, there may need to be a lottery system used to assign beds.</p>
<p>Fort Ethan Allen</p>	<p>This site is so big it's practically its own ecosystem. Plots are in-ground and 25'x25' making them very different from the small raised beds at most other sites. Some gardeners here are homeowners and others are CHT renters, so there's a blend of newer gardeners and folks who have had their plots for over a decade. Residents here are interested in having their own garden committee and having more autonomy over physical aspects of the garden such as splitting bulk compost or pitching in to fix the water. Most plots are well cared for, but a few get left untended every year, which quickly causes weeds to get out of control because the plots are so big. Shared work days have been an effective way to tackle this here. Staying on top of plot assignments and re-assigning plots that go untended is important here to minimize weed overgrowth, and there are lots of gardeners here that are eager to take on extra space when it is available. Workshops are pretty well-attended here, but many gardeners are very experienced and prefer more advanced topics.</p>

<p>Garden Apartments</p>	<p>Gardeners here have really transformed their small space and are community minded, even creating a "free veggie stand" this season. However, there have been some challenging interpersonal disputes that have caused conflict this year. Garden beds here are in good shape structurally, but could benefit from soil amendments, and the garden design is incredibly inaccessible. There are no ADA beds and pathways between gardens are hard to walk through even for the most able-bodied. Gardeners here have expressed a strong desire to have as much autonomy over the space as possible, and have even taken on mowing/weed whacking the lawn surrounding the gardens after too many mistakes were made by maintenance teams that damaged their crops. Residents here have mixed levels of garden experience, but the ones who are most engaged are pretty experienced and prefer more advanced workshop topics. Residents are interested in engaging more with the surrounding natural area and would love to have a pollinator garden and more native plants, perennials, etc.</p>
<p>Green Street Community</p>	<p>Green street had pretty low engagement this year, partially due to the very late timing of the reconstruction of some of the garden beds (July!). This site now has a blend of old beds, that are very large, but with very old soil, and new beds with new soil, but which are significantly smaller than the old beds. There likely may be some conflict over the size and quality differences of these beds in the future, as some greatly prefer the size of the old beds. More effort could be made next year to reach new gardeners - one resident highly recommended door-to-door flyering here and said that the apartments have a bit of turnover and many residents don't even know the gardens exist. This site also has major accessibility issues, with the gardens being located on a hill. Two new ADA beds were placed in a flatter seemingly more accessible location this year, but the hose for those beds remains in an inaccessible location and ultimately, none of the gardens are wheelchair accessible.</p>
<p>Harrington Village</p>	<p>Long-time gardeners here were very frustrated by the changes that were made to the beds this year, but newer gardeners expressed gratitude for their beds, and overall people were able to grow a decent variety of crops. However, the new beds really are quite small and definitely need new soil and to be filled all the way up (newly constructed beds were filled with mixed, weedy, old soil this year, and were not filled up properly). There are some interpersonal conflicts here, especially around kids tampering in others' gardens and theft of crops. Most gardeners had two beds this year because there was not as much interest in the gardens and were therefore extra beds, and because beds are so small that many wanted additional space. Residents here also have mixed levels of experience, but include a number of folks who are very knowledgeable about gardening. Workshop attendance was low, however, and most folks don't seem particularly interested in engaging with the workshops or are too busy to.</p>

<p>Maple Tree Place</p>	<p>Maple Tree Place similarly was given much smaller beds after the re-build, however they were given fresh soil and the entire project was done much better, including a nice gravel-filled ADA compliant accessible area. The mid-season notes are incorrect about the timing of the bed installation - beds were completed just in time for the garden season (but only barely). Despite the installation of many new beds, only a few folks participated in the program, allowing participants to each take two or three beds. More effort should be made to reach out to potential new gardeners next year, as there is currently plenty of room for more people to garden. Workshops were poorly attended, but residents did seem to get pretty good use out of their beds. This site has two garden areas, and only one was renovated. The "top" garden area, which only has 3 beds, could use repairs next year. This site has also had a number of pretty bad interpersonal conflicts over the years. Nothing came to head too bad this year, but there has been major harassment between residents, and conflict between residents kids' as well. This conflict is partially to blame for how few residents have stayed in the garden program.</p>
<p>South Meadow Apartments</p>	<p>This site has two garden areas, both of which have unfortunately been very neglected physically. One area is further down the road by the cul-de-sac, and beds here need repairs, and it is unclear who exactly gardens here as it hasn't been well documented over the years. It would be great to make more of an effort to work with gardeners in that area next year. In the main section, there are 24 beds, including 6 new ADA beds, and a garden "playscape." Unfortunately, beds have consistently been poorly tended, and gardeners have given up because there has been a lot of vandalism in the gardens. Usually the vandalism is done by kids, some quite young, and I don't think it is done with intention to harm, but it is disheartening for many. Most workshops are only attended by kids, adults are more likely to come when free plants and seeds are being distributed. Many gardeners here are New Americans and may speak English as a second language, making communication more challenging here. I would love to see translation services put to use here in the future for flyers and pamphlets. Kids here, despite often causing some wreckage, are actually very enthusiastic about gardening, but it can be hard to lead them when they're in a large group. Having an additional adult or two available for workshops here is super helpful. I'd love to see a more intentional kids gardening program here in the future. A number of kids expressed interest in having their own beds, and I think this could be a great way for kids to take more responsibility for their actions around the garden area and feel more invested. The old beds here desperately need more/new soil. The condition of the "playscape" is very bad, and there should be a larger discussion about what to do with it next year since residents have not participated in its upkeep.</p>
<p>Susan's Place</p>	<p>As contracted, VGN hosted a container garden workshop at Susan's Place. Coordinating for this event went smoothly. Suey and Hannah Gale were great communicators and helped us to pick a time and get the word out. We came prepared with containers, potting soil, plants, and trellises. Six residents partook in the workshop, some of them bringing their own containers in addition to the ones we provided. Planting was a success and residents were pleased with their mini gardens.</p>

Suggestions for Future Programming

- Reconsider the scope of the contract. For example the basic plan proposed by VGN doesn't include the monthly workshops which we saw had the lowest attendance.
 - Include one workshop on soil management- the most requested topic for future support.
- Take advantage of VGN's expertise and consult with VGN prior to establishing new or replacing worn out garden beds and/or soil.
- Establish crucial points of contact at each site such as property managers, maintenance staff, project managers.
- Shift contract timeline to beginning February. This would help to ensure that:
 - Garden bed repairs or replacements are made prior to May so that garden beds are ready for opening day.
 - All interested gardeners have been assigned plots and have signed gardener agreements prior to May.

For further site by site suggestions, refer back to Audrey's [list of site by site suggestions](#) .



