



2024 Final Report for Evernorth

Growing Food, Growing Community at Affordable Housing Sites



Gardeners at Putney watering in new plants (left) harvesting carrots (center), and putting gardens to bed for winter (right). A full season of work in just a few photos.

Program Description

Growing Food, Growing Community (GFCC) 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. The GFCC 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. VGN partners with Evernorth at thirteen properties 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 a total of 95 gardeners at the following Evernorth properties:

1. Creekview
2. Mcknight Lane
3. Peter Coe & Seminary
4. Pine Meadows
5. South Maple
6. Vergennes Community Apartments
7. Firehouse
8. Hunt Farm
9. Pleasant Hills
10. Evergreen Place

11. Downstreet
12. Wheeler Brook
13. Putney Landing

The Garden Coordinator's position is seasonal part-time, averaging 6-8 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 Veggie Van visit
- Delivering material resources such as plants, seeds, compost, tools
- Delivering educational opportunities through workshops and bi-monthly garden newsletters
- Communicating with gardeners around bed assignments, garden related questions/concerns
- Communicating with Evernorth's property managers and resident engagement managers

Ava Murphy coordinated Addison County sites while Nic Stevens coordinated Washington County sites as well as Hunt Farm, Firehouse, and Pleasant Hills. Nic left midway through the season, shifting responsibilities to Angela and Ava who successfully completed the season. Residents who had Ava as their garden coordinator shared a few gratitudes for Ava. In their words:

"Ava was very attentive to everyone, especially when you don't know what you're doing."
-McKnight Lane

"Ava has been so helpful and very nice :)" - Vergennes Community Apartments

"Very helpful to have someone who can answer questions via text!" -South Maple

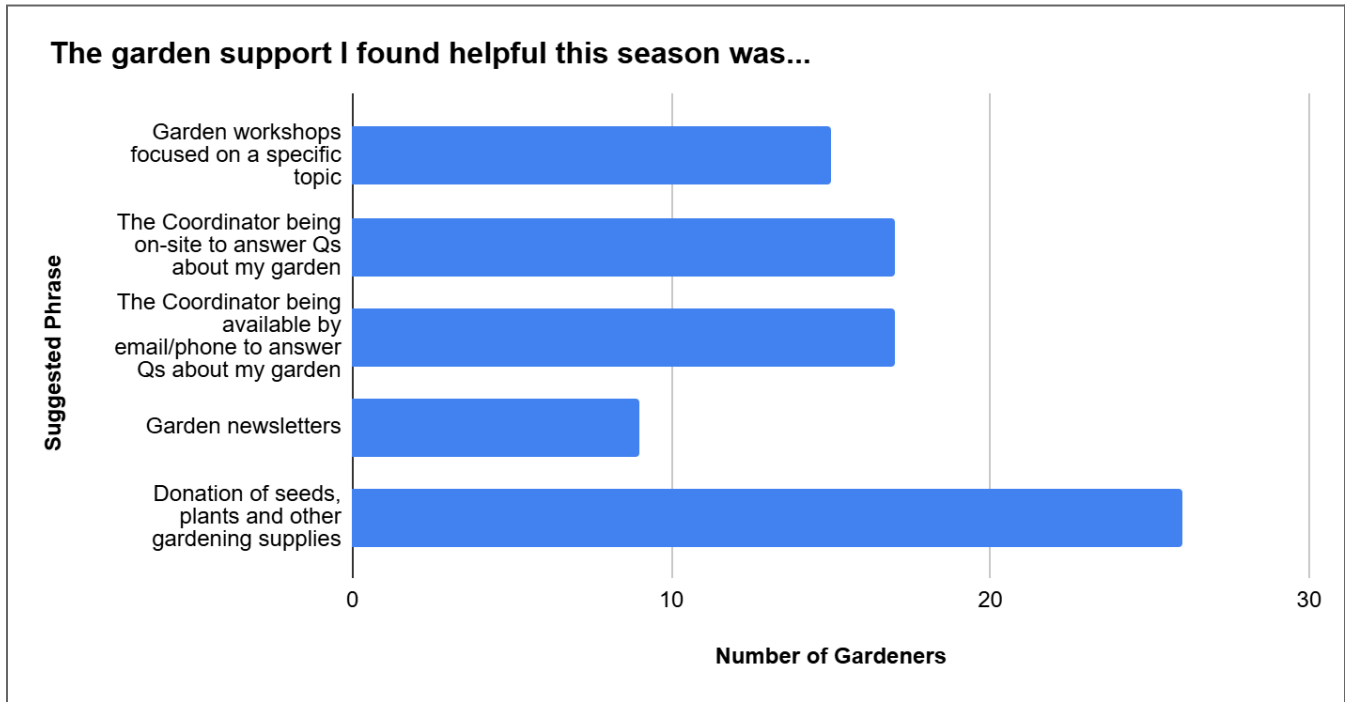


Ava assisting gardeners at McKnight Lane and Creekview.

Program Assessment

VGN successfully completed all program deliverables as detailed in the program contract. In early October, Ava and Angela 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 27 resident gardeners.

Surveyed gardeners reported that technical assistance provided by the Garden Coordinator and donations of material goods were the most helpful garden supports.



Attendance

Garden Coordinators record attendance at all scheduled events as a way to track resident participation and accurately inform programming decisions. Nick and Ava fulfilled their responsibilities to spread the word about upcoming events through emails, phone calls, text messages and flyers. Additionally, they responded to frequent requests for shifting activity times to late evenings and weekends in order to accommodate resident schedules.

Of the 14 sites there is a total of 115 beds and 95 gardeners. 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. Evernorth sites had the highest percentages of engaged residents across all 21 housing sites that VGN manages. Within Evernorth, Addison County had the highest rates of attendance alongside Putney Landing. Washington County sites recorded the lowest rates of attendance. Of those events, the Veducation Van visit saw the highest participation percentage with an average of nearly 60% of residents attending the event.

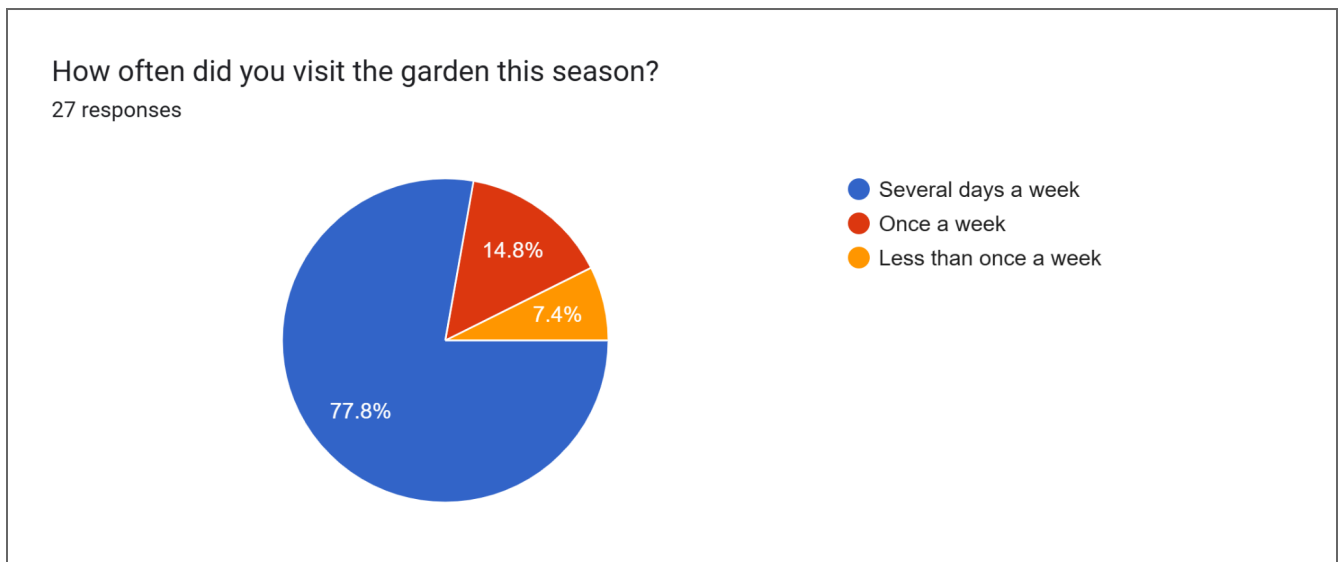
Evernorth Property	Average Percentage %
Hunt Farm	100
Mcknight Lane	75
Firehouse	64
Putney Landing	63
Evergreen Place	60
Vergennes Community Apartments	57
South Maple	56

Peter Coe & Seminary	53
Pine Meadows	50
Pleasant Hills	40
CreekView	30
Downstreet	20
Wheeler Brook	18

Resident Gardener Experiences

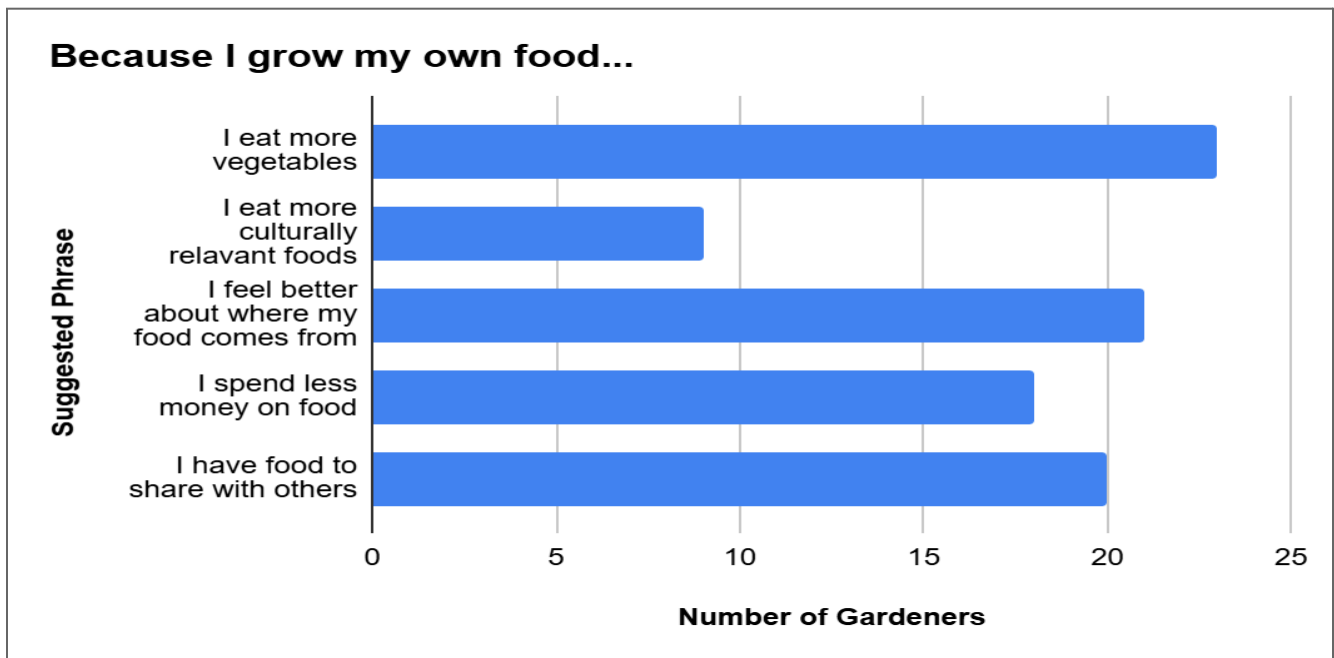
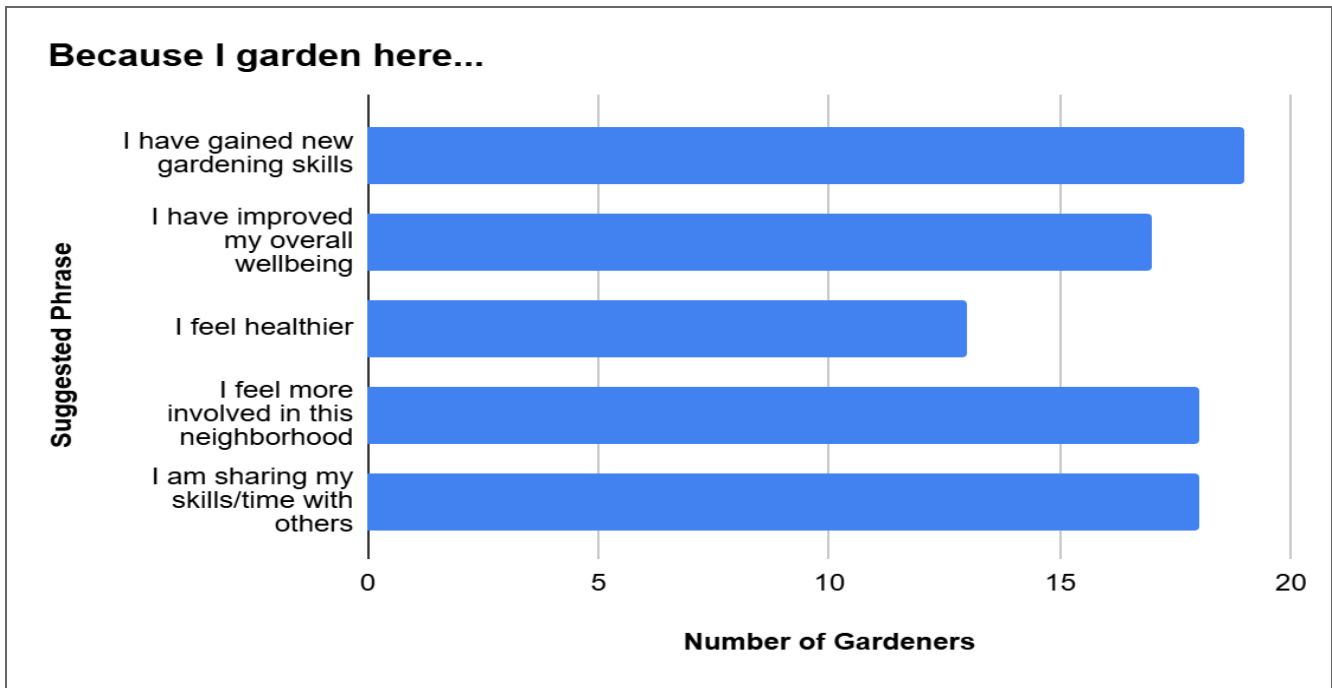
The following graphs and testimonies provide a more detailed picture of how this program impacted resident gardeners. It is encouraging to know that residents visited their gardens quite often. One gardener shares:

"I love being able to walk out my front door to my garden." -Putney Landing



The following two graphs touch upon the impact that gardening has on many aspects of a resident's life - from eating more vegetables to feeling a part of the community. 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. In one gardener's words:

"Gardening has always proved beneficial for me as it's a way to decompress, enjoy time outside and see the results of my efforts." -Evergreen Place



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:

Community Building

“It was very relaxing and a good place to catch up with others.” -*Firehouse*

“Nice to be out with my neighbors.” - *Evergreen Place*

"Learning more as we go and having a garden space has been a great experience for myself and family." -Vergennes Community Apartments

Food & Land Access

"We look forward to the fruits - and vegetables - of our labor this winter!!!" -Peter Coe

"It is nice to see plants grow and feed the people." Vergennes Community Apartments

"Having the space to garden has helped us have more fresh veggies and eat healthier."
-Hunt Farm

Gratitudes

"I greatly appreciate the garden and support of the VT Garden Network."-Firehouse

"We all love the tomatoes that we get to share with others. [...] Thanks to both of you for coming today and teaching us how to pickle. And thanks to Downstreet for letting us have this program. Much appreciated." - Evergreen Place

Constructive Feedback

"The garden coordinator visiting more often will make us gain more skills in gardening." -
Putney Landing

Site Specific Notes

The site specific notes below capture noteworthy information about each site, including levels of participation, successes, challenges and suggestions for next year. These notes are written by the garden coordinators and are in addition to those shared in the mid season report.

Housing Site	Site Specific Notes
Creekview	Request to have the water hose closer to the garden beds on the West side, perhaps connected to a reel that lives in the center of the garden as it was hard to haul water especially for ADA residents. Spoke with the two residents on the waitlist about building some new beds for them for '25. The Housing Provider (as communicated by Tori in June '24) has no funds to contribute to this property. Recommendation to sort out the "shared bed" and see if this could go to one of the interested residents. East side will likely need some sorting out as well. One gardener complained that he was left to do all the work and others abandoned their plots. One shared bed on the East side as well.
McKnight Lane	One bed was left un-gardened this season (#7). Spring '25 recommendation to convert this bed to ADA as there is a resident who says she would like to garden but needs an ADA bed. Tori (as communicated in June '24 email) and housing provider will pay for soil for this bed conversion. There is one gardener who has 2 beds at this site. The hose has had consistent issues and keeps busting -high water pressure? Replaced with new hose in July '24 and already showing signs of wear. Recommend pressure reducer at spigot.
Peter Coe	Needs some bed repair! Spring '25 recommendation to repair baseboards on beds 5, 6, and especially 7. There is one waitlist resident here and we spoke with Tori about building an additional bed. She said that they think that space is maxed out but is open to receive a proposal and photo with the exact proposed location of the new bed. Recommend attempting this for Spring '25.

Seminary	Very hard to connect with this site! Only one gardener ended up using a bed or two and we only met her once. Recommend treating this site as separate from Peter Coe and trying to meet other residents there who might be interested. The two sites are very close to one another but are totally different and it didn't work so well to loop them together.
Pine Meadows	We had a hard time with this site. There is some serious feuding amongst residents here. Seems like folks are upset that the couple (Emir and Senada) have 2 beds and purportedly tried to take on others. There's a lot of bad-mouthing of other gardeners and folks not getting along. It seems like there is interest and potential for other residents to get involved but we were unable to connect with folks who had initially expressed interest (never hearing back after multiple attempts and knocking on doors). Recommend converting bed #8 (Heidi's) to an ADA bed due to her accessibility needs. Also recommend new soil for bed #7 (Willow's).
South Maple	One gardener moved away this season so her bed is now available. Small site with fairly consistent participation. Recommend getting them a new spray nozzle for '25 as they don't currently have one (Crystal took hers with her when she moved).
Vergennes Community Apartments	Needs some serious soil boosting! Beds all got compost at the beginning of the season but things were looking sad on Closing Day. Not sure what is up but seemingly soil nutrition is way off. Recommendation to replace/top off soil and amend throughout season '25. Recommendation to revisit bed assignments as a couple of folks took on two beds this season (since they weren't being gardened), one gardener moved away, and Charlene (who was sharing a bed with Paulette) is interested in having her own bed. Seems like folks are amenable to going back down to 1 bed each though. Also recommend revisiting Gardener Agreements as there was a complaint about a resident gardener over-watering everyone's bed without asking.
Evergreen Place	There is a core group of four gardeners who have shown up to almost every garden event and one other gardener who is less friendly. They have expressed that gardening has become a time for them to connect and spend time with one another. Garden beds could use work- recommend replacing old beds with ADA accessible beds as most gardeners here are elderly. Beds are also quite small so if redoing new ones, we suggest going bigger. Beds that were fixed this year look sturdy but still pretty small. Bed placement is great, right along the paved walking path. There has been a volunteer, Quyal, who has been doing a lot of work with the gardeners and has been coordinating with Steve the property manager. She inquired about working as the Garden Coordinator next year and VGN would love to invite her to apply as having someone local to the area and passionate is key.
Downstreet	We have only been able to connect with one gardener all season who also seems to be the only one accessing the garden beds. It was difficult to engage with any other potentially interested residents because the property manager said he couldn't give us contacts and we didn't have access to any community space within the building. The garden itself is in great condition with accessible beds, walk paths, and great places to sit and watch the garden happenings. Nic filled many of the beds with fresh compost this year. The main goal for next year would be to sign up more residents for garden plots and have better access points for communication.

Firehouse	Gardeners here have been a delight! They were very engaged in workshops and seemed excited for next year. During the pickling workshop everyone was on time and used the time to check in with one another. I would strongly suggest continuing programming at this site as it was the most engaged group. Recommend topping off soil in all beds in Spring '25. Beds were new in '24 and soil has settled a bunch and is very low. Consider setting up a compost system for the garden area. Nancy Martell taking over bed #8 for '25 season.
Hunt Farm	There are two areas with garden beds. One is nicely placed with a great view of the mountains and fenced in with a toolshed. Beds in this area look great and soil levels are good, however, not many people are gardening up there aside from a couple gardeners and a communal garlic bed and another communal strawberry bed. Gardeners said the tool shed had wasps and a mouse in the straw bale. Recommend taking care of both these issues next spring. There are three more ADA garden beds by the building. These were all maintained this summer. One gardener, Jess, grew up farming and uses the garden to teach her daughter how to grow food. She also has access to neighboring farms where she can access compost at a discounted rate. Lots of kids at this site who have enjoyed the workshops along with the adults. Emily Mason is also interested in gardening but had originally given up her plot over a dispute with another gardener who I believe is no longer around.
Pleasant Hills	Very low participation and difficult to get in contact with gardeners. Beds are also scattered throughout the property. Recommend getting more support from a property manager or SASH coordinator to help connect with current gardeners and potentially interested gardeners more effectively.
Wheeler Brook	Very low participation post opening day and June planting day. Beds looked well tended to and cleaned up for winter. There is a lot of potential here given the placement of the gardens beds being in the direct center of the housing units. We are also able to flyer in the laundry room which is helpful for future events. Steve is a responsive property manager so if we make an organized effort, next season could be more effective.
Putney Landing	Great site all around! Beds are well tended to and residents (adults and kids) were interested in the workshops and grateful for the plants and seeds we provided. Many of the gardeners only planted the plants and seeds we provided showing how important they have been as a resource. Lots of appreciation shared from the gardeners and one gardeners said how she had so many tomatoes that she would share them with her coworkers. Elena, the SASH coordinator was immensely helpful, truly the MVP of the season! She was there for every event was really helpful at managing gardeners and supporting VGN as we led our workshops.

Suggestions for Future Programming

Communications

- Establish a solid relationship between VGN and all resident engagement contacts such as property managers, SASH coordinators, or simply access to community spaces. This needs to be done early in the season so that VGN has access to engage potential resident gardeners and keep them informed on all gardening events of the season.
- Share a calendar of events with other event planners at housing sites so that we are not overlapping and/or so that there could be a chance for collaboration.

Timing

- Ensure that all bed repairs are made prior to May so that garden beds are ready for opening day.
- Ensure that all interested gardeners have been assigned plots and have signed gardener agreements prior to May.

Resident Disputes

Garden Coordinators have reported that resident disputes arise in the garden during events and that these interpersonal disputes are challenging to manage while teaching. Also, it has been noted that these disputes often deter people from gardening at all. In an attempt to manage this better we suggest:

- Garden coordinators receive a pre-season training on managing and/or de-escalating conflict.
- Have an Evernorth contact present during gardening events.
- Establish who a garden coordinator can go to to share information post conflict.

Additional Workshops

- Add workshops on preservation and companion planting in our climate. These were the most requested topics by residents in the survey.



Quick Pickling using the Veducation Van was a hit at housing sites this year! Here we are at Pine Meadows (left), Creekview (center), McKnight Lane (right), and Hunt Farm (below).

