

A Collaboration Effort Supporting Food Security

Kingsley Commons Community Garden

The community gardens at Kingsley Commons and the grassroots effort making them possible could serve as a model for others seeking to improve food security by providing residents with access to space to grow their own vegetables where they live. It is an example of local government agencies, non-profits, volunteer groups and business partnering to help strengthen our community and build self-reliance through vegetable gardening.

History and Growth

Kingsley Commons is a 500-townhome community in Falls Church that includes units for public and Section 8 housing and fair market value units. The community gardens grew out of property owner John Freeman's desire to revive a small existing garden, formerly used by a 4H club, that had fallen out of use. Working with the Fairfax Food Council's Urban Agricultural Work Group, the Arlington Boulevard Community Development (ABCD) organization, Virginia Cooperative Extension and the Fairfax County Master Gardener Association, the garden, now called Garden 1, was made ready for use in 2021 with four raised beds shared by eight gardeners and a youth garden program. Mentors from Hands on Harvests and Master Gardeners supported the youth garden and provided advice to the gardeners from planning what to grow through to harvesting.



photo: Hands on Harvests

Because of the popularity of the garden and demand for more plots, the owner agreed to install another garden, Garden 2, which opened in June 2022. The owner provided the land and funding for the fence, water and a tool shed. Hands on Harvests (HOH) funded lumber, soil, compost and tools with a grant from Transurban and provided seeds and seedlings to the gardeners. The Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District also supported the expansion with technical support and a design plan. An Eagle Scout candidate managed a crew of Boy Scouts to assemble the raised beds and Girl Scouts produced informational signage. The mentoring team from HOH and the Master Gardeners formed in 2021 was expanded. While many of the gardeners already knew how to grow food and what they wanted to grow, the expanded gardens gave them access to land, materials and tools to make it happen.

The mentors are also learning from the gardeners as some of the growing techniques and crops are new to the volunteers. They learned about quelites, a Spanish term for a host of edible wild plants that grow in hot climates and are foraged in Central and South America. This includes plants the mentors saw as weeds to be pulled but which are desired by some of the gardeners in cooking food.

This summer, thanks to a donation from a Master Gardener, several new raised beds were added to Garden 2. HOH purchased two new sheds, one funded by the Camelot Garden Club, that were installed in the gardens. A HOH volunteer built a large composting station in Garden 2 while new composting bins donated by Master Gardeners were added to Garden 1. The mentoring team continued to grow with additional volunteers from HOH and Master Gardeners. Several HOH Grow A Row volunteers donated seedlings based on the gardeners' plans.

Current Status

Currently, the two gardens, co-managed by HOH Board Chair Stacey Evers and Master Gardener Carrie Conley, comprise 25 raised beds and several pots and grow bags shared by over 20 gardeners. Both gardens are fenced with locking gates. There is easy access to water with hoses. The sheds are well-stocked with tools and other garden supplies provided by HOH, as are plant supports, soil amendments and compost. The gardens are next to playgrounds and existing neighborhood community centers and include picnic tables for the gardeners to meet with their fellow gardeners and mentors and for use for community events.

Childrens Garden

Three of the beds in Garden 2 are for a children's garden led by a partnership of Fairfax County Neighborhood and Community Services and HOH with support from the Master Gardeners. NCS operates a center for after-school and summer youth programs in a building next to Garden 2, providing safe and easy access for its use in their programs. The program has offered children several activities, including art in the garden that led to painting of the picnic tables, coding to make moisture meters, and using the harvest in meals served at the center. Some of these activities were done in partnership with Rosie Riveters and the McLean Project for the Arts. The kids also take some of the harvest home.



photo: Hands on Harvest

During a recent visit with the center manager, the children's garden was bursting with warm season crops as summer camp kids enthusiastically harvested ripe tomatoes and cucumbers. The children are involved in all stages of the garden, planning what to grow, planting, weeding, watering and their favorite part, harvesting. They recently began putting in cool season crop seeds.

Language Support

Because many of the gardeners are Spanish-speaking, HOH recruited a volunteer Spanish interpreter to join the team this summer and facilitate communications between mentors and gardeners. HOH assembled notebooks with bilingual reference materials on gardening that are stored in each garden shed for use by mentors and gardeners. Bilingual informational signs are posted in the garden. HOH hopes to organize Spanish language lessons for the volunteers, all of whom want to improve their proficiency in Spanish.

Community Events and Meetings

HOH and the Master Gardeners organize events to build and strengthen a sense of community around the gardens and to publicize the garden to the residents. The events bring the residents together to share seedlings and seeds, do seasonal planting and harvesting and participate in educational programs. For the Spring planting event, HOH paid for LambMowers to bring a flock of sheep to eat the winter cover crop from the youth garden beds before Spring planting. A harvesting party is held every year in late October. Several local businesses have contributed to the community events, including El Tio Restaurant, Giant Foods and Fresh Market.

Comments from the gardeners have been positive. One said that having her garden has allowed her to save money on groceries and eat more fresh food. After starting work in their new garden, another said it felt like she was coming up above ground after being underground for a long time. Another said that his garden is one of the few places he ever feels peace.

Planning for 2024

An end of season survey is planned to get more gardener comments on their experiences and their wishes and priorities for 2024. A planning meeting with the gardeners and mentors will be held in February/March to decide what they want to grow and lay out their plots using grids provided by HOH.

Future Plans

Tentative plans for the 2024 growing season include reorienting the mentoring program to provide short workshops on topics such as composting, staking and aerating, trimming tomatoes, diseases, insects, pollination, etc., followed by time to work with gardeners on their specific issues.

HOH is planning to use Kingsley Commons as a model for additional community gardens to give people what they need to grow vegetables near to where they live and improve access to fresh food.

Recognition

HOH recently received a Channel 7 News Helping Hands donation of \$2,200 from Easterns Automotive Group in recognition of their efforts to improve access to fresh produce through support for community gardens, as exemplified by the gardens at Kingsley Commons. The donation will be used to cover operating costs for HOH programs and the HOH organization.

While Carrie and Stacey provide day-to-day operational management, they and the others involved recognize that the gardens are thriving because of robust partnerships involving HOH, Master Gardeners, VCE, ABCD, NCS and the property owners.

If you would like to help by volunteering time or making donations, links to some of the organizations that may need your help are listed below.

References

[Hands on Harvests](#)

[Fairfax County Urban Agricultural Working Group](#)

[LambMowers Professional Grazing Services](#)

[Northern Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District](#)