

Community gardens unite Harford residents with a passion for growing and clean eating



The Havre de Grace Green Team offers a total of 59 plots, and a few plots are still available this year. The group is exploring the possibility of expansion in 2016. Plots are scattered around the town of Havre de Grace on Market Street, Seneca Avenue and the “Old Reservoir” property near Havre de Grace Community Center. Plots are 10 feet by 10 feet and available for \$35 per year.

By **Linda Burkins**
For Harford Magazine

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What's growing in Harford's community gardens?

MAY 1, 2015, 4:20 PM

Anne Slater had high hopes for the container garden on the deck of her Havre de Grace condo, but the plants weren't having it. They didn't die, but the tomatoes and herbs they produced were disappointingly small.

“There wasn't enough space, and there wasn't enough sun,” Slater explains.

Now she grows fresh produce in one of the 10-foot-by-10-foot plots at the Havre de Grace Green Team's community garden on Market Street — with a much higher yield.

Slater is among a small but growing contingent of community gardeners in Harford County. It's a trend that's been slow to catch on here, where locally grown foods are readily accessible and rural backyards offer plenty of space, but it's finding a home among residents looking for more than just a plot in the ground.

"Community gardening is not just a term for us," Slater observes. "This really is a community project."

Unlike many urban areas, where community gardens are commonplace (Baltimore has more than a dozen), just a handful operate in Harford. The Havre de Grace Green Team maintains 59 plots scattered among Market Street, Seneca Avenue and the "Old Reservoir" property near Havre de Grace Community Center — that's up from 12 plots in 2012. Grand View Farm in Forest Hill offers a dozen 15-foot-by-15-foot plots. And with high rates of renewing subscribers, both groups see room for growth.

"Many people in Harford, like myself, live in condos or have shady gardens at home," explains Carol Zimmerman, chair of the Havre de Grace Green Team's Community Garden Initiative.

At the Havre de Grace gardens, all plots are the same size, but participants are welcome to lease more than one plot. The cost for the season is \$35, and deer fencing and access to water are provided. Participants are free to grow fruits, vegetables or even flowers. One gardener added color to his plot by planting a rosebush.

"I enjoy that," Slater says. "I get the pleasure of looking at his roses without the trouble of caring for them myself."

Some community gardens emphasize the importance of organic practices and place restrictions on the types of fertilizers or pesticides that can be used. At Grand View Farm, it's part of the mission. Nick Bailey and his father, Wil, co-owners of the farm, are dedicated to "respect for animals, respect for the environment and respect for our customers." Wil Bailey was a large-scale grain farmer for many years but felt there had to be a better way.

Now Grand View Farm has made a name for itself as a leading producer of humanely raised, pasture-fed beef, pork and poultry.

"We started the community garden project because there's a direct connection to the sort of people who come out here looking for humanely raised meats," Nick Bailey explains.

As a result, "we don't allow invasive plants — and no GMOs [genetically modified organisms] or synthetic fertilizers," he adds.

Sharon Trotta, a community gardener at Grand View, maintains her plot, in part, because she believes in Grand View's mission.

“I won’t eat anything that doesn’t come from a farm I know anymore,” she says. She’s shopped regularly at local farmers’ markets since moving to Bel Air from Baltimore in 2011 and was thrilled to discover Grand View via an Internet search.

She pays \$90 for the use of a 15-by-15-foot plot each season and thinks it’s a great deal. She’s grown green beans, tomatoes, peppers, potatoes and zucchini.

“I definitely overplanted the zucchini,” she adds with a laugh.

Trotta and Slater agree that tomatoes are their favorite plants to grow.

“Tomatoes are my most successful plants,” says Slater. “You can never grow too many of those. People never turn down fresh tomatoes. They have so much more flavor than the grocery store tomatoes.”

But the fresh, tasty produce is just part of the benefit of community gardening. In addition to land and other materials donated by the city government, the Havre de Grace gardening initiative also receives support from area businesses. Susquehanna Hose Co. provides water for the gardens, real estate agent Allen Fair offered the use of land for some of the plots and Vulcan Materials has offered assistance in numerous ways.

“They provided gravel for parking areas, but also to improve drainage for the plots,” says Zimmerman.

“Mayor [Wayne] Dougherty reached out to us initially and asked if we could assist,” says Patrick Pieton, plant manager for Vulcan Materials at the Havre de Grace quarry. “Once we met Carol Zimmerman and saw her passion for providing a place to allow others to grow their own food, we wanted to get involved.”

Passion might be the common thread in the world of community gardening. Zimmerman and Bailey are clearly following their passions in launching these projects, but participants are equally enthusiastic. The high rates of renewing subscribers mean it’s important for prospective gardeners to get in touch now to have a chance at a plot next spring — there’s often a waiting list.

To inexperienced gardeners who hesitate to get involved, Sharon Trotta says a community garden is a perfect place to start.

“You can handle it,” she says. “You can be totally green and inexperienced but with a community garden, there will be other people around to help you and give you advice.”

More Resources

Healthy Harford

healthyharford.org/healthy-living/community-gardens

Healthy Harford is a “healthy communities initiative” and a joint project of the county health department and Upper Chesapeake Health. Its website includes general information about community gardening, as well as links to other gardening projects.

Grand View Farm in Forest Hill

Contact: Nick Bailey 410-937-2221

grandviewfarming.com/what-s-fresh.html

This year, Grand View has a dozen community garden plots, but there's room for expansion. Each plot is 15 feet by 15 feet, and the fee for the season is \$90.

Havre de Grace Green Team Community Garden Initiative

Contact: Carol Zimmerman 410-939-2770

hdgreenteam.org/communitygarden.html

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Growing Up Gardening: Community gardening for kids at APG

Some kids might not be able to explain where their food comes from, but 12-year-old Shyann Stolo can.

Since 2012, Stolo has participated in an innovative gardening project at the Aberdeen Proving Ground (APG) Edgewood Area Youth Center called the Vegucation Project. The program encourages children to learn more about the origins of food and other products they use every day.

"Kids grow up so insulated from reality now," says Shyann's mother, Naomi Stolo, a technician at APG.

Organized by the late Renee Main, the program gives kids the opportunity to choose what plants to grow and how to use them. Main died late last year, but the center plans to continue the program.

Vegucation is affiliated with 4-H, notes Catherina Winn, a staff member at the youth center who assists with the project. "They provide a lot of assistance in preparing garden beds and helping in other ways."

Children involved in the Vegucation Project not only learn to prepare and cook foods, but they also get opportunities to participate in area farm fairs.

"We mostly grew vegetables," says Shyann. "But we also grew flowers and other things."

One of those other things was cotton. In 2013, Shyann was named Junior Grand Champion in the Science Education Category at the Maryland State Fair for her cotton plant.

"Shyann never would have dreamed of doing something like that on her own," Naomi Stolo says. "Knowing how easy it is to grow their own food and other plants gave the kids confidence, not just about gardening but about trying other new things."

Shyann says she hopes to be involved in the program again.

“I think it might be a little hard without Miss Renee, but I would enjoy doing it again,” she says. “I learned a lot about gardening and it was fun. It gave me a lot of pride.”

The Vegucation Project is located at the Child, Youth and School Services at Aberdeen Proving Ground's Edgewood area. For more information, contact Catherina Winn: 410-436-2098.

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