



# DOWN ON THE FARM IN

# Cherry Hill

By Alice Riehl | Photos by Nicole Shilliday, Nicole Shilliday Photography

Cherry Hill started as an agricultural community; the township even got its name from Cherry Hill Farm. While it's been a long time since most of the township residents have tilled the soil for a living, in the heart of the township there is still a place where crops are nurtured and harvested, where tomatoes still ripen under the Jersey sun and where people still grow the vegetables that they put on the table. All of this happens at the Barclay Farmstead Community Garden, home of the township's Plant-A-Patch program.

The garden consists of over 150 seasonal 24' by 24' plots that can be rented for only \$30 a year and another 6 that are 60' x 60' and farmed year-round. Megan Brown, who oversees the program for the township, says that no one is sure when it was created, but it most likely began soon after the township bought Barclay Farmstead in 1974 and began renovating the house. It's been a haven for expert and novice gardeners alike for as long as anyone can remember.

Stefani Kasdin, who created a Facebook page for community gardeners a few years ago, has farmed her own two plots for about 11 years. Like many of those working plots here, Stefani has a garden at home as well, but she finds special benefits to this one. For one, the community garden gets direct sun almost every day, all day, perfect growing conditions for most crops. Few home gardens have the same properties.

The garden is also a place of peace and quiet. Just a few blocks from Route 70, the Farmstead, which includes the house, the wooded area, an apple orchard and the gardens, is cloaked in silence. Stefani will often come out early in the morning and sit in one of her garden chairs, just taking in the silence with her cup of tea. The quiet is broken only by the sounds of the Goldfinches flying across the plots. In the evening, the sun sets between two rows of trees just at the end of the gardens, putting on a show for those gardeners still working.

All day long, gardeners come and go. Some are retirees who tend their gardens during the day, others go to work during the week and garden early and late afternoon or on weekends. Some families garden together. Some who work their plots have come here directly from places like Ukraine and Guatemala, countries whose own troubles make the peace of the garden even sweeter and more needed. Gardeners of every ethnic group, age and background are represented here and work

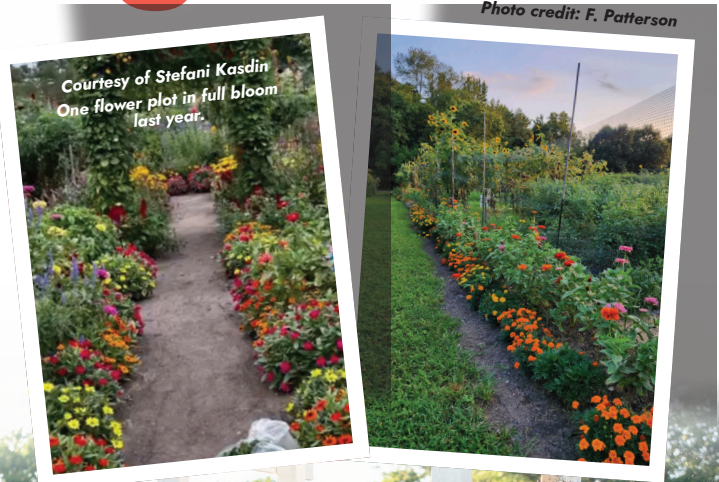


Photo credit: F. Patterson



Bob Corressel



together. The people are united in their one desire—to grow something from the earth. The garden has become a refuge from the often-chaotic modern world.

Most of the gardens have at least some vegetables or other edibles, but almost every gardener also plants flowers and some grow only blooms, making the gardens a feast for the eyes as well as the taste buds.

The community garden has indeed become a community. Each spring, gardeners hold a seed and seedling swap to help others grow a diverse crop. Advice on best practices is always available from people like Jerry Dinger, who came down to Cherry Hill after a career in New York. He decided to become a Certified Gardener, a program put on by Camden County. Now he is a go-to-guy for those with questions about what to do when something goes wrong.

The gardeners got together to form a committee a few years ago, a group of people who make sure that things run smoothly, and that people get what they need to be successful. Emma Waring is on the committee. Originally from North Carolina, she's been a gardener at the patch for about 14 years and now often has her son Judson help with the most strenuous chores.

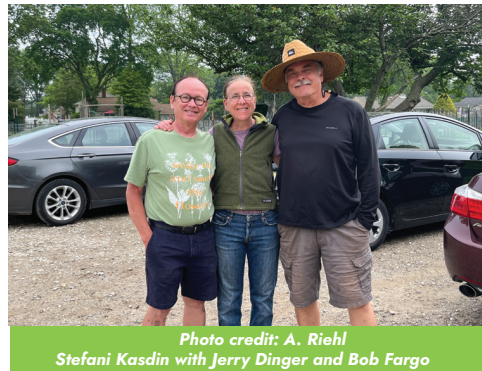
At the end of the growing year, the gardeners get together for a banquet at the Farmstead featuring all the fruits (and vegetables) of their labor. Excess produce is sent to the Cherry Hill Food Pantry so very little is ever wasted. The Farmstead also maintains a kitchen medicinal herb garden tended by one of the committee members, Bob Corressel.

Every gardener with a seasonal plot starts over every year. In October, the township plows the land. That means that all fences, furniture, arbors, tools, everything that cannot be composted, must be removed. Then in spring, people with patches begin developing the land once again. Each year there are those who decide for whatever reason to stop farming. This leaves their plot available to the next gardener on the waiting list, which is maintained by the township. Megan Brown says that annually her office asks people if they wish to continue on that list. New registrants are also added. The number of new people who get plots is determined by how many gardeners from the previous year decide not to return.

The township provides water to the gardeners and delivers a huge mound of leaf compost in the spring for anyone who wishes to use it and continuously replenishes the mound during the growing season.

For the year-round plots, there are benefits and downsides. The farmers do not have to remove their tools or structures like fences and trellises, and they are able to plant perennial vegetables and flowers. But without plowing every year, sometimes weeds can get a foothold and require some effort to remove. Bob Fargo has one of those gardens. He's been taking care of a plot in the garden since the 1980s. When asked, he will regale a visitor with the benefits of just being out in the garden and perhaps urge you to smell some of his fragrant harvest, plants like garlic scape.

Until a few years ago, the apple orchard was maintained by Lars Loercher, who with his wife Marietta had been farming one of the year-round plots since 1978. One of his last actions in the orchard before his death was to plant a new apple tree; Stefani, who helped the couple with the harder jobs during their last few years of gardening, has been making sure that tree thrives. (The orchard is now maintained by the Friends of the Barclay Farmstead, a non-profit entity that supports the preservation of the farmstead.) Stefani also has lilies from Marietta that she lovingly plants in her garden and saves every year. They are over one hundred years old and once belonged to Marietta's mother.



While the gardens can be idyllic, they have the problems that other gardens have. The deer from the woods are especially fond of the produce. And there are the usual insects and critters who bedevil almost every gardener. But the gardens are organic, using only natural means of control.

The waiting list for a plot is closed now but it will reopen in the winter. Next time you visit Barclay Farmstead, perhaps for one of the free concerts (See Calendar), grab an apple from a tree in the orchard and come and check out the gardens and especially the glorious flowers.

