

# Plant a Garden...

## Watch Your Community Grow

“I love gardening! The first time I ever gardened was in a Victory garden with my father. I was fascinated,” says Ginger Kabala, the president of the South Wheeling Preservation Alliance. That was seven decades ago and she’s still digging in the dirt today.

Kabala and Brother John Byrd sat down at a picnic table at the South Wheeling Preservation Alliance Garden, across the street from Pulaski Field, recently to talk about community gardening.



“I wish more people here in South Wheeling were taking advantage of it,” says Byrd.

That’s why he, Kabala and

fresh-food advocates across West Virginia have started their own versions of community gardens.

In Bridgeport, the city is in year one of a community garden project located next to city hall. It’s the pet project of City Clerk Andrea Kerr. She saw a need to help feed the less fortunate in the community and got the ball rolling by creating a 12-bed raised garden benefiting Shepherds Corner Food Pantry. Community members adopt a bed or two or more, plant and care for them and then donate their harvest.

“I adopted three beds,” explains gardener Rose Trupo. “Andrea had the plants ready to go. We got to choose what we planted. I tried to see what everyone else had and wanted to fill in the blanks. I planted a bed of green beans, a bed of watermelon and a mixed bed of tomatoes and zucchini.”

Other community gardeners have peppers, squash, and cucumbers blooming in their beds.

“It’s beautiful and it’s flourished. We’ve already delivered fresh food to Shepherds Corner Food Pantry. A lot of folks who use Shepherds Corner have very limited resources. Through this community garden, kids and adults are getting accustomed to eating fresh fruit and vegetables, flavors they might not be exposed to otherwise.”

Plans call to expand the garden next year and recruit more volunteers.

Meanwhile, Five Loaves and Two Fishes Food Bank in Kimball, McDowell County, is run by Linda McKinney. She says since Walmart shut its doors back in January, the area has become what’s known as a food desert, a region that lacks access to fresh, affordable fruits and vegetables.

“There’s no farm market here. If you want fresh food you have to travel to Mercer County or all the way to Raleigh County,” says McKinney and those are no easy trips. The Bluefield Farmers’ Market is 31 miles away and takes nearly an hour to get there. The distance to the Beckley Farmers’ Market is 55 miles and requires an hour and a half drive. “You have to take into consideration the travel time, the condition of the roads and you better have a full tank of gas. That’s not something everyone can afford.”



Kimball is in the heart of what used to be coal country. But with most of the mines now idled, money is in short supply. McKinney says food doesn't have to be. "Everybody eats. Why shouldn't everyone grow?"

That's why McKinney and volunteers at Five Loaves and Two Fishes are developing a unique community garden program. They're teaching students and adults who visit their site how to grow using hydroponics. That involves growing garden staples like peppers, strawberries and lettuce, not in the dirt but rather in tall, stacked containers using water and minerals as food. The technique isn't widely used in West Virginia, especially for back yard gardeners. However, McKinney says once people learn how it's done and buy into to process, they can create their own hydroponic towers at home using what little land they have available.

"We go into the school system, we bring children here to Five Loaves and Two Fishes to teach them about gardening. It's amazing the foods kids will try if they grow it themselves." McKinney says the students are fascinated by hydroponics and the food growing out of the towers. With a few 5-gallon buckets, some tubing, water and minerals, McKinney and her son Joel teach the children how to build their own. The goal is to get the kids interested and, in turn, take those ideas back to their parents and grandparents.

McKinney says the older generation in Kimball knows how to grow food. A garden was a must in the early and mid-20th century if you wanted to put enough food on the table. She stresses hydroponics is just a new way at looking at an old tradition. "Right now we're transitioning from education to growing."

McKinney is in the process of building a high tunnel and more raised bed gardens at Five Loaves and Two Fishes for the "more traditional gardener." In the end, she says it's important to get the community growing, embracing new technology and, most importantly, eating healthy. "I have big plan but a small checkbook. We need to get everyone involved."

Back in South Wheeling, Byrd and Kabala are harvesting their own kind of community garden using two plots of land that were vacant just six years ago. Back in 2010, the South Wheeling Preservation Association rounded up donated items like cinder blocks, top soil, wood chips and water barrels to create the foundation

for their garden.

People from South Wheeling and surrounding communities can rent out raised beds or in-ground plots at the garden for \$10 or \$15 a season, based on the size. The growers get to keep everything they harvest, although they are encouraged to donate a small portion to a local food bank.

All 16 in-ground and 12 raised beds are occupied this summer. Everything from corn to dill, sunflowers and eggplant are popping up out of the soil. The early lettuce has already been harvested. "I wish more people here in South Wheeling were taking advantage of the garden," says Byrd, a member of the Marist Brothers, an order within the Catholic Church. "We want this to be about community building, putting people in contact with each other. These are people who would



never make a connection otherwise."

Kabala adds, "That's been our fight all along, to take a neighborhood that

was decimated when the steel industry moved out, full of negative thoughts and attitudes, and do something positive, like this garden."

There are those in Ohio County who see South Wheeling as old and tired, a less than desirable neighborhood. However, where blighted buildings once stood, the garden has now come alive with color. It's a bright spot, a landmark, a gathering place.

Kabala wants to see the energy that comes from a garden grow and attract young people who want to learn how to plant a garden of their own and eat fresh-picked, nutritious food.

Three different areas of West Virginia, three different kinds of gardens but at the heart of them all is a desire to change the community one plant at a time. Feeding the needy. Education. Bringing the community back together. Those are the seeds for a future generation.