

Community Gardens for an Ecological Future

The Bethlehem Gadfly community gardens June 2, 2020

🌿 *Latest in a series of posts on community gardens* 🌿

Connor Burbridge is a **Community Fellow** at Lehigh University and has been an organizer with the Community Action Development Corporation of Bethlehem and the Southside Garden Alliance for the last two years.

Gadfly:

Climate Change is something that has been a big concern for a lot of people, including in Northampton County. According to researchers from Yale, 64% of people in our county think climate change is happening and are worried about what changes it will cause



(<https://climatecommunication.yale.edu/visualizations-data/ycom-us/>). This concern has been acted on by the city of Bethlehem with the recent approval of the Climate Action Plan. With the climate plan still in its beginning stages, it is now increasingly important for our community to put forward the challenges we face and the solutions we would like to see before our city commits to a climate plan for the next ten years. With the recent discussion around expanding community gardening in Bethlehem, I would like to put forward community gardens and backyard gardens as a key part of the solution to climate change that Bethlehem should address in its Climate Action Plan.

As an organizer with CADCB and the Southside Garden Alliance for the last two years, I have worked closely with community gardens and garden projects throughout South Bethlehem. South Bethlehem is already home to four different community gardens, including MLK Park Community Garden, the Esperanza Garden, the Lynfield Housing Community Garden, and the Southside Permaculture Park.

These community gardens are vibrant community space, where neighbors work together, grow their own fresh healthy food, and share in the harvest. There is nothing quite like seeing neighborhood kids for the first time pick a leaf of an herb and then bite into it, their eyes glowing in amazement and wonder. These kinds of experiences reconnect people to each other and the land, showing that a neighborhood is not just a place to live but a place to grow.

Community Gardens help the climate crisis in two major ways. First, gardens help to build social resilience by having us be more connected with our neighbors and community. With the upcoming changes from Climate Change, social resilience will be very important in keeping our community strong during trying times. Second, gardens cut down on waste and fossil fuel usage by providing healthy fresh food right in our backyards and neighborhoods. This has two benefits of reducing our reliance on fossil fuels and by also providing good food that improves the health of our community. Another added benefit is that gardens can also help take out carbon out of the atmosphere and help reverse climate change.

Starting and managing community gardens is hard work. Many people do not know how to garden or have the supplies to garden. Reaching out to people year after year takes a lot of time and resources. The Southside Garden Alliance has been trying to solve this problem with educational workshops and giving out free gardening supplies. However, our resources and funding are very limited, as we are a small program. In the 1930s, Bethlehem Mayor Robert Pfeifle saw to it that Bethlehem City managed over 175 garden plots and provided supplies for gardens to plant and preserve their harvest (<https://www.bapl.org/digging-into-the-roots-of-south-side-gardening-pre-world-war-i-immigrant-gardens-and-today-tbt/>). As part of Bethlehem's current Climate Action Plan, the city can achieve something similar.

Imagine community gardens in every Bethlehem park where neighbors gather and share recipes and home cooking, with seeds supplied from the Seed Library at the Bethlehem Area Public Library and fresh soil supplied from the city of Bethlehem's kitchen compost program.

Imagine getting to try fresh salsa made with tomatoes, onions, and peppers that your neighbor grew in his or her backyard.

Imagine walking through alley ways with vines of fresh beans, peas, and sunflowers draping over the fences.

This has been a part of Bethlehem's past, and it can be a part of its future again.

Here are some possible considerations the City of Bethlehem could incorporate into its Climate Action Plan in order to ensure a successful community gardening program:

1. Hire a part-time community garden organizer to manage and help build gardens in all of the city's parks that can support a garden, including the Rose Garden
2. Create a community compost program for community member's kitchen scraps similar to the Easton Compost Program
3. Support the creation of a Seed Library at BAPL
4. Work with BASD's Farm to School Program to connect students and their families to local neighborhood gardens

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