

# Community gardens need infrastructure from the City and a good manager

The Bethlehem Gadfly City government, Climate Action Plan, community gardens, gardens, community, Sustainability May 25, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on City Government* 

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ref: [Mary Toulouse's pitch](#) for a planning process to develop community gardens.

Gadfly:

I have tried to keep various community gardens afloat on the south side for a number of years. Interest and use of the gardens waxes and wanes over time, but they often face basic infrastructural challenges that inhibit success.

For instance, many years ago when Alice Gast was president of Lehigh University, she built a community garden in the MLK Park on Carleton Ave. However, no one ever set up a water spigot for this garden, so we have had an ongoing challenge of sustaining water there.

A community garden should not be set up without a source of water. We put water totes in the garden, but then they must be filled by the city, which is difficult to coordinate. If a nearby home owner fills them, then their monthly bill for sewage treatment increases, because the provider thinks all that water going into the tote is going down the house's drain.

Another problem is ongoing maintenance. The city has not been willing to manage the weeds or otherwise take care of a community garden on public property, even when they will let people garden there—I'm sure you can imagine how large that task might become if gardeners started expecting city workers to take care of their garden beds.

Consequently, the gardens need people who are committed to not just growing their own food but taking care of the collective space. This has been a challenge at times. But I think a reliable source of water at a garden would draw more support from community members, so the development of infrastructure must go hand-in-hand with increasing expectations for gardeners to take care of their collective space.

When the Maze garden was destroyed, a group of students at Lehigh University were successful in working with Mayor Donchez to develop a section of the Greenway between Taylor and Webster streets, which the students used for gardening and cooking programming they organized for the kids in the Bethlehem Boys and Girls Club. They planted fruit trees and installed raised beds and used the garden until Boys and Girls Club was moved. At that point, the garden was too far away to use in the same way.

This section of the Greenway is now maintained by a group of volunteers at Lehigh University and also by a local group that takes care of the beautiful Native Plants Garden that is also on that section of the Greenway. Because of the centrality of the location and the public nature of it, we have never been able to make this a garden where community members can grow their own food. That probably would require fencing and an area that does not have so much traffic, so the Greenway is not the best location.

There are other areas for gardens. For some time there were beds up at Ullman Park, but this garden suffered from a lack of infrastructure and consequently a lack of commitment.

For this reason, as mentioned above, I have come to believe that creating the right infrastructure is the most important part of a garden's success. There must be water, fencing, beds, and someone who can ensure certain tasks are handled, such as compost delivery, waste removal, path maintenance, weed control, etc.

It's possible that a motivated community group can do these latter tasks on their own, if the water and fencing is there, but I don't think it's wise to expect this when gardeners have to lug their own water to their beds and fight off pests that eat their food.

Other crucial resources needed are tools and information and education. But it might make more sense for people to use these things to garden in their own backyards (if they have a backyard) rather than on city property, where the water remains a limiting factor.

In general, gardens are great if the city commits to providing some infrastructure and you have a tyrannical manager who also happens to be a good community leader, which is not easy to find.

CSAs (Community-supported Agriculture) may be a better way to feed people than gardens, but that's another conversation.

Let's keep this conversation going. I think that in certain places gardens can really thrive and become meaningful to the community.

Breena