

Hill Street Garden | Local group brings green space to life

By Dave Kuruc



Tips for others thinking of starting a community garden in Hamilton:

- Be persistent: it will take determination to overcome all the unforeseen challenges.
- Get good advice: from Hamilton Community Garden Network, books, others with experience, environmental consultants, etc.
- Don't expect the City to do everything for you: citizen-led gardens have real advantages, and the City is a large bureaucracy
- Network in the community: local churches/faith-based organizations, neighbourhood associations, non-profits, business
- Have support of local Councillor: you may need to navigate City Hall, address neighbours' concerns, etc.
- Don't hesitate to ask for help: local businesses, other experienced people
- Make it beautiful: gardening isn't just about the food production, so make it has an inviting design - gardening is a form of art, after all!

For more information on the Hill Street Garden - visit www.hillstreetgarden.org

The newest community garden in Hamilton launched last month in the Kirkendall neighbourhood in Hamilton's west-end. Emma Cubitt from the Hill Street Community Garden broke away from digging and planting to tell us all about it.

H: How did the idea of the Hill Street Community Garden come about?

EC: The idea coalesced from a number of factors. Our Coordination Team – Katrina VandenBerg, Crystle Numan, Emma Cubitt, and Graham Cubitt - each had previous experience in community gardening elsewhere. We knew there was strong local interest in environmental and food security issues, that 50 per cent of local residents are renters, and that local churches had a desire to facilitate community-building initiatives. And we believed that communities are made stronger by having more civic involvement, so we wanted to help create a place for people to come together in a positive way.

First, we talked with the local Councillor Brian McHattie, who was very supportive. We identified the best available site and approached the city in December. Three local neighbourhood associations, Scout troops, and other local partners got on board. We persisted through the process at City Hall to finally achieve the garden's creation this spring.

H: What have been some of the biggest challenges to making the garden a reality?

EC: Navigating City Hall was the biggest challenge. Since the site is municipally-owned, we needed city approval to use it. But we weren't familiar with how everything has to be circulated through the various departments--Risk Management, Public Works, Legal, Parks, etc.--and just how long that process can take. The city has since developed a new Community Gardens policy, but we were one of the early proposals through so there was a lot that hadn't been figured out yet. One of the things we found most frustrating was not knowing what the city's needs were, just that our requirements kept changing without satisfactory reasons. In the end, Councillor McHattie helped facilitate a successful resolution of the issues.

Because of the city's requirement for raised beds, the second biggest challenge was getting the necessary supplies. We needed almost \$10,000 worth of wood, soil, compost and other supplies. We were turned down on our four grant applications, but didn't have time to apply for more and still get started this year. So we approached local suppliers who all responded generously (list of suppliers on website). In the end, we had to raise about \$2,000, which has all been donated by local people.

H: Some folks see parks as field of grass and places to play baseball; why is it important to have neighbourhood parts act as much more?

EC: Community parks and open spaces need to respect the diversity of people that surround them. So it's important to have spaces for sports and running, walking a dog, lying in the sun or tending plants. Just as baseball diamonds and skate parks foster involvement in sports, we need community gardens to foster local horticultural involvement. Growing things is inherently part of the human experience, so facilitating gardening is actually a way to promote a more peaceful, humane world. And parks that have multiple types of users are actually more interesting to be in while spreading out the usage across the seasons and times of day.

H: What events and activities are being planned around the garden?

EC: The garden is about much more than growing vegetables on your own plot. It's about learning and sharing, so every Wednesday evening there will be people there helping each other learn about gardening. We're having a seed swap in late May, poetry readings each month, and growing a pizza garden to introduce kids to where food comes from. We hope to have a Master Gardener and other experts come talk, and we want the space to become a beautiful space where people can just sit and relax. ❧