



Gardening from the ground up

In Govan, south-west Glasgow, the decline of the Clydeside shipbuilding industry has left joblessness and social isolation in its wake. Ian Sharp describes how a new community garden is flourishing here from the ground up, providing locals with much more than free vegetables.

I'd heard a rumour about the creation of some community allotments, so in February last year, I went along to Linthouse Housing Association to find out more. It turned out that the organisations involved were hoping to set up a market garden, however they said they'd had trouble attracting interest from local people. So I offered to try and get things up and running.

It looked as though the designated site within Elder Park would not be big enough for people to have their own plots, so I planned it as a communal growing space where folks could meet and learn. I knocked on doors, asking for donations from local companies – apart from the odd refusal, most seemed happy to help. So, armed with a few tools and some odd materials, I tried to build the beginnings of the garden.

Below: This is how the site looked before work started. Above: Nowadays it is a real hub for people. Photos: Ian Sharp.



After a couple of months someone stopped at the gates to ask what I was up to. It seems I'd been talked about by those who lived nearby. When I explained what I was doing, they said: "Aye, I've seen you in here pushing wheelbarrows and stuff, so you don't work for the council?" "No," I replied, "I'm just trying to make a wee space to feel good in." From time to time after that, people would arrive saying that they'd heard what was going on and they'd like to help. So a month later, we formed a community group with around 20 core members and countless friends.

Garden of friendship

Most of the people who come to the garden are unemployed. Some would like a job, but not under the current system as they feel it doesn't provide what they want. Most are aged in their 30s or 40s. Our garden has no paid staff, and there is no-one to tell people what they must do. They don't get any pay, they're not told to come by the job centre or community service, there are no certificates coming their way. Yet I have witnessed members working way beyond their comfort zone in all types of weather, and with no special tools or materials to make it easier.

Most projects of this type that I am aware of in Glasgow have paid staff and many have had up to £100,000 funding on top of the wages. For the most part, we have simply recycled from skips and received goodwill donations from the community. Local

people often drop off stuff they think may be of use. There are countless examples of the positive social effects of the community garden, as acquaintances help and learn from one another.

Few of the people who have joined the project knew one another, and some knew no-one in their local area. The garden has been a great resource to many who were previously isolated and living in flats with nowhere to meet, except home or along the street. Many cannot afford to go out or take part in paid-for activities. I've been to the garden in torrential winter rain to find 20-odd people there, crowded round under a tarpaulin. We grow vegetables, but that's not what people come for. They come for the company.

Personal space is vital, it provides solace in a busy world. However, when personal space becomes isolation, it can be very destructive. To have free communal space is essential for any group of people. It's a basic human requirement, we get sick when we don't have this. The positive effects of natural environments on those who live almost exclusively in the inner cities is plain to see. Perhaps those in power need to spend less time in artificial environments. We are born of the earth and must be connected to it, not only for our own health, but for the health of the places which we inhabit.

Planning, people... and free veg

Recently, there has been much discussion in Glasgow around the planning of communities, with Melissa Mean, head of the Demos Self Build Cities programme, providing guidance to Glasgow City Council. The debate seems to have become fractured due to the City Council's inability to face the facts that Demos uncovered during their study. Such discussions are of great relevance to projects such as our community garden.

So despite the obvious effects of Nature Deficit Disorder being recognised nationally, policy clearly shows that furthering corporate wealth is considered far more important than everyone being well. A case in point is the latest initiative from the government, often referred to as stalled spaces, which offers derelict land to those who wish to help their community. It says, in effect: "Yes, we really care, so you can use this old bit of land... until we are able to sell it. Then you'll have

to leave." A new supermarket or an allotment site – which one involves money? Which one gets planning permission?

Planning and regeneration efforts should involve communities at ground level, as they see it closer. The argument that such decisions must be taken by professionals simply doesn't hold water. Every inch of Glasgow has been knocked down and redeveloped, yet there is often very little sense of community. Back in the micro-setting of our community garden, we struggle to find the space to do those very things the government claim they want us to do. In the meantime, we simply try to grow into what we'd like to be.

We don't sell the produce from the garden. People often look surprised at this, but collecting 50p for a lettuce from a neighbour is not going to change anything, and the dignity gained from giving it away far outweighs a few pennies. We see the effect all the time when someone

stops to 'buy' some produce from the garden. You can actually see the thought go through their mind: "What do you mean it's free; why would someone do that for me?" Then you think as you watch them walk off down the road: "Well, whatever happens to them today, they'll have a wee bit of light in them."

I sometimes wonder about selling the food as some often suggest we should, but it works better to give it away when you grow your own – we all need that connection to the earth. We're not growing veg, we're growing what people need to feel human. The veg is just the cover story.

<http://legup.jimdo.com> or search 'Legup Govan' on Facebook

Ian Sharp is the Chairman of LEGUP (Linthouse, Elderpark and Govan Urban Planters). Email iansharp73@gmail.com

Clockwise from left: Working on the tattie bank; a basket of veg from the garden; the sweetcorn patch. Photos: Ian Sharp.

