

Growing Community: Neighborhood gardens encourage urban residents to reconnect with land

By [Rosalie Rayburn / Journal Staff Writer](#)
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Shaded under a big hat, Mary Harris pulls onions from her garden row at the Rio Grande Community Farm in the North Valley. (Courtesy of Mary Harris)

Mary Harris walks along the garden row she has worked at the Rio Grande Community Farm. (Courtesy of Mary Harris)



ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Spring is the season of promise; the soil is warming, leaves and flowers are budding and months of growing time lie ahead.

Community gardens

Rio Grande Community Farm: riograndefarm.org, info@riograndefarm.org, 505-916-1078 (voicemail only)

Mountain View Neighborhood Association: svcna.org/mountainview, Lauro Silva president: alcoat1944@gmail.com, founding member Amzie Yoder: amzielena@gmail.com

Ilsa and Rey Garduño Community Garden: Southwest Organizing Project (Project Feed the Hood) 505-247-8832

HB & Lucille Horn YMCA garden: 505-265-6971

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Albuquerque residents who lack yard space have an array of options to indulge the yearnings of their inner green thumb at one of the many community gardens dotted around the city.

Some gardens are associated with a social purpose organization that aims to empower neighborhood residents to grow their own food.

Schools have gardens that provide an educational as well as food production role, and there is the fee-for-a-plot model based on traditions in European countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany.

The U.S. has a long history of community gardens, such as the “Victory Gardens” established on public and private land during World War I and World War II to boost food production.

Nowadays, community garden supporters also tout the ability to produce food organically, improve access to a healthier diet and to encourage urban dwellers to reconnect with the land.

In recent years, there has been a shift nationwide toward more people growing food in home and community gardens, from 36 million households in 2008 to 42 million in 2013, according to a 2014 National Gardening Association report.



Mountain View community residents Leroy Vaughn, left, and Amzie Yoder look at a tiller donated to the Mountain View Community Garden and Sustainability Project at Second Street and North Street in the South Valley. (Greg Sorber/Albuquerque Journal)

However, community garden initiatives face many challenges in Albuquerque. The vast temperature swings, the dry climate and alkaline soil make growing more difficult than in areas with better soil and abundant rainfall.

Fee-for-plot

Nissa Patterson, special projects coordinator at Bernalillo County Extension Service, who supports the school gardens efforts, has seen many community gardens come and go.

“I think people underestimate the tremendous amount of work that

gardening is,” Patterson said. “It’s hard in our lives to fit that in between children and work, and it’s not necessarily what people do for leisure.”

The nonprofit Rio Grande Community Farm uses the fee-for-plot model. It was formed in the late 1990s to manage a 16-acre parcel of land off Montañño west of Fourth Street that the city purchased from a private developer. Part of the land is used to create the Maize Maze, which is open to the public and generates revenue for the organization.

Two acres are available to people who pay an annual membership fee, currently \$100, for access to an 80-foot row. The fee includes access to tools, irrigation, manure and compost, said garden coordinator Ian Colburn.

North Valley resident Mary Harris, an avid gardener, was delighted to get a space there when she moved to Albuquerque two years ago from Minnesota.

“In Minneapolis there is a waiting list for community gardens. It takes time to get one,” Harris said.

She has grown onions, garlic, okra, peppers and she’s considering trying beans and potatoes this year.

“I have always liked growing my own vegetables. Years ago I worked on an organic farm and it became really important for me to know where my food comes from,” Harris said.



Stefany Olivas with the Southwest Organizing Project works in a raised bed at the Project Feed the Hood garden at 1410 Wellesley Drive SE. (Rosalie Rayburn/Albuquerque Journal)

School gardens

Albuquerque Public Schools launched its Growing Gardens Team project in 2009 to study gardens that had been independently planted in schools districtwide. The study found that the gardens, mostly in elementary schools, were being used as “live, experiential outdoor classrooms” where students, staff, parents and community agencies could collaborate to grow vegetables, flowers and herbs.

The gardens also provide an opportunity to teach children about healthy nutrition, said Fallon Bader, the APS school gardens coordinator.

There are now more than 80 school gardens throughout the area including gardens at charter and private schools.

Albuquerque Academy started its Desert Oasis Teaching Garden project in fall 2013 with a mix of funding from grants and donors.

“Our idea is to be a community resource, not just for students and parents of the school but people from the Albuquerque area who want to learn about soil building, water conservation and creating a habitat for pollinator species like bees and other insects who help propagate (plants),” said Karen Temple-Beamish, the garden director.

Food grown in the garden is used in the school cafeteria and sold at a farmers market. The garden is also used for public teaching sessions and workdays where participants can use the techniques they learn, Temple-Beamish said.



Ears of corn harvested from the Mountain View Community Garden in the South Valley. Residents of the community benefited from produce grown in the garden. (Courtesy of Amzie Yoder)

Healthier food

Mountain View Neighborhood Association, which represents a multicultural low-income area of the South Valley, worked with Bernalillo County and the Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority to get permission to use a two-acre site beside the water treatment plant as a community garden and “sustainability project.”

“One of the goals is to provide homegrown, healthy, fresh produce for our community so we have better health and fight childhood obesity. We want it to be a social gathering place for people from different backgrounds,” said Neighborhood Association President Lauro Silva.

Using a \$5,000 county grant and with advice and help from local businesses, community volunteers transformed a wasteland of trash and weeds into a garden that produced chile, zucchini, squash, peppers, tomatoes, kale, lettuce, beets, corn and much more.

Silva plans to offer access to a 90-foot garden row to community residents for an annual membership fee of around \$25.



The Ilsa and Rey Garduño Community Garden, formerly called the International District Community Garden, is named after the former city councilor who helped secure the site from the City of Albuquerque Aviation Department for the garden. (Rosalie Rayburn/Albuquerque Journal)

Feeding more

Southwest Organizing Project, a community activist organization, is also involved in gardening at some Albuquerque schools and through its Project Feed the Hood garden at 1410 Wellesley SE. Formerly known as the International District Garden, it is now called the Ilsa and Rey Garduño Community Garden after the former city councilor and his wife who helped obtain the one-third acre site.

Elsewhere, the HB & Lucille Horn YMCA at 4901 Indian School NE received a PNM Resources Foundation grant to start a community garden.

Now heading into its second year, garden coordinator Don Kelly who did most of the initial landscaping, hopes to have more volunteer involvement and be able to produce enough vegetables, fruits and herbs to sell to the community.



Immigrants and refugees from Africa, the Middle East, Cuba and other lands, volunteer to work at a community garden space at Los Altos Christian Church in the Northeast Heights. (Courtesy of Nkazi Sinandile)

Last year, Los Altos Christian Church at 11900 Haines Ave. NE allowed the organization Immigrant and Refugee Resource Village of Albuquerque, to use some church land to start a garden. Immigrants and refugees from Africa, the Middle East and other areas volunteered to prepare the site and the International District-based East Central Ministries provided seed, manure and guidance.

“The goal is to grow vegetables for people’s consumption,” said East Central Ministries Director John Bulten.