
South Royalton Community Garden

2020 ANNUAL REPORT



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South Royalton Community Garden



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A Letter from the Managers

Dear Community Members,

As we reflect on the 2020 growing season, our hearts fill with gratitude even as our minds acknowledge what an extraordinarily difficult year this has been and continues to be for every community around the globe. We knew this growing season would look different as Covid-19 ravaged the state, country and world, and we were not sure what to expect for the South Royalton Community Garden. Like most other groups, we had plans in place that were no longer feasible given our new reality, and we had to quickly pivot to a model that would allow for safe utilization of the garden space and protect the health of all gardeners.

Knowing just how crucial outdoor recreation and access to food would be as Covid-19 threatened our communities, we knew that *not* having some type of program was not an option. So, as Vermonters do, we rolled up our sleeves and got to work. We installed a sink inside the fence line to ensure that gardeners could wash their hands regularly, marked 6-foot distances, supplied the tool shed with cloth masks for all gardeners (graciously donated by the South Royalton Mutual Aid group), and followed the Community Garden Network's [Guidelines for Safe Community Gardening](#).

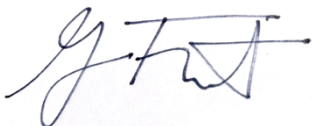
What followed was an incredible season of (socially distanced) connection, enthusiasm & passion for growing food with some returning and many new gardeners, which brings us to our gratitude. We extend our deepest gratitude to the South Royalton Recreation Committee for trusting us with the management of this invaluable community resource; to our local farmers for donating seedlings and compost, and for partnering with us to host on-farm events; to the South Royalton Market and First Branch Coffee Co. for supporting us in various ways; to the area food shelves for providing the perfect outlet for getting community-grown food to those who need it most; to our community for the overwhelming support and positive feedback; and, most importantly, to the gardeners who make it all possible with their laborious love of growing food in a shared space.

The 2020 growing season brought new successes as well as new challenges to the South Royalton Community Garden. Participation in the Open Space program increased significantly, as did the generational and geographical diversity of this group. We were also able to increase the quantity of fresh vegetables shared with our community's food shelves. The Community Garden grew to include food-related workshops and events for town residents, which all exceeded even our own expectations in terms of engagement. Perhaps most notably, we successfully conducted a region-wide needs-based assessment survey for a Community Center for Agriculture, a vision that the South Royalton Community Garden is spearheading as part of the 4-Town Food Resiliency Committee.

We hope you enjoy diving into the details of these successes and more with this annual report. It is truly an honor to serve our community through the South Royalton Community Garden, and we hope you'll consider joining us next season! All are welcome, all the time.

With Gratitude,

The South Royalton Community Garden Management Team



Megan Fuerst



Caroline Gordon



Elsbeth Sherman

2020 Growing Season by the Numbers



554 lbs of fresh, organic produce delivered

The Community Garden expanded its programming to include On-Farm events and Food Demonstration workshops in partnership with local farms. We hosted **four events** from late June to September with a total of **50 attendees**. Events were held at Luna Bleu Farm, Hurricane Flats Farm, First Branch Coffee Co., and the Community Garden.



4 community events with 50 total participants



16 long-term community gardeners

The Community Garden and the 4-Town Food Resiliency Committee conducted a needs-based assessment survey to test the viability of a "Community Center for Agriculture" in our region. We received **214 responses** from **35 farmers**, **122 homesteaders** and **57 consumers** from the Tunbridge-Royalton-Sharon-Strafford area.

The Community Garden saw a significant increase in the number of active private plots and Open Space participants. There were **7 individuals with private plots**, an increase of **75%** compared to 2019. The Open Space program had **9 long-term participants**, an increase of **80%** compared to 2019. There were many more volunteers who showed up once or twice throughout the summer.



Needs assessment survey with 214 responses

Mission & Principles

The South Royalton Community Garden aims to grow an interconnected, vibrant & healthy community by creating space for individual and communal gardening that nurtures local food security, climate resiliency, sense of well-being and agricultural literacy.

Core Mission Goals:

1. **To increase public space for growing food and medicine.** We believe that food and medicine are human rights, and envision a future where every community has public space dedicated to providing these human survival essentials. We grow organic food and medicinal herbs because we believe that healthy food is healthcare, and that every human has a right to health.
2. **To improve access to healthy and fresh food for all community members.** The Community Garden lives on public land, and the food grown in the Open Space is food grown for the community as a free public resource. The Open Space program is an invitation for anyone to engage in the maintenance of the Community Garden and benefit from the bounties harvested with no strings attached. We also share harvests with area food shelves, supplementing the amount of fresh and healthy produce available to patrons.
3. **To develop educational opportunities that increase regional agricultural literacy.** Many people are interested in growing their own food, but not everyone knows where to start or has access to the resources necessary. The Community Garden is a space where people of all skill levels can share knowledge about how to garden organically and preserve food properly, and so much more. These skills are intended to be taken home to encourage working landscapes in our region.
4. **To build resilience to climate change.** Mitigating the climate emergency means to prepare for systems collapse. The Community Garden aims to increase preparedness by engaging collectively towards an increasingly self-sufficient food supply chain. The Community Garden is a model for how a small space can have a big impact in terms of carbon sequestration, soil and pollinator health, reducing food miles, de-mechanization, and biodiversity - all key solutions for addressing our climate catastrophe.
5. **To nurture connection to each other.** The Community Garden is a community gathering place, where gardeners (including short-term volunteers) can connect on a personal level and address the needs of our community in a fun way. We believe that programs like this can create a sense of purpose and self-worth for everyone involved. Our strategy is to make gardening/micro-farming a recreational activity, where it's fun to hang out while seeding, weeding or watering. The shared responsibility makes the work go by easy and connects the people doing it.

Open Space Program

“The Community Garden’s Open Space program has tremendously helped the South Royalton Community Food Shelf this summer. The weekly donations have allowed for all patrons to have access to fresh vegetables. We have appreciated this partnership beyond measure.”
-Anna Wright, South Royalton Area Food Shelf

About

The Open Space program started with a mission to utilize fallow land in and around the existing Community Garden in a collective, regenerative, and productive manner. There are supervised open gardening hours twice per week where inexperienced and experienced people alike can come together to improve their organic gardening skills and connect to the land and each other. Once participants are familiar with the garden space and community guidelines, they are welcomed to use the space on their own terms as well. This year, open gardening hours were held every **Monday and Thursday from 4:30 - 6:30PM**. Additionally, every Thursday morning the management team delivers crop surpluses to food shelves in and around their community.

2020 Highlights:

Soil Preparation with Sweet Potatoes

When the Open Space program piloted in 2019, plot use increased by over 200% as we brought all plots that were not reserved for private gardening into production. This year, we shifted focus to the fallow land just outside of the fenced area which completes the parameter of the Community Garden. This 20'x100' parcel was previously overgrown with weeds, whose seeds invaded garden plots. In 2019, we recycled a tarp of thick black plastic from the Town’s old ice rink to cover this space. The heat generated by the sunlight on the black plastic kills weed seeds in the soil and suppresses new weed growth. This year, we got 250 sweet potato slips from Hurricane Flats’ Farmer Geo Honigford to plant in the space – sweet potatoes thrive in heat. Growing the potatoes under the black plastic allowed us to use the space for growing food while simultaneously continuing our weed suppression project.

Medicinal Herb Garden

Medicinal herbs are a common interest among the gardeners at the Community Garden and an area of growing interest among people in general, as we are all doing our best to stay healthy in light of high-stress lifestyles and many global crises. Our established private plot gardeners, the “elders” of the Community Garden, grow many medicinal herbs among their annual vegetables and use these plants as herbal health supplements. This year, the Open Space program established a 20'x25' medicinal herb garden in order to promote the wellbeing of body, mind and soul beyond the necessary nourishment of calories. The plants grown here were shared among community gardeners and turned into teas, tinctures, and other herbal preparations.

Saving Tomatoes with Trenches

This year was a challenging year for tomatoes – a favorite crop of many community gardeners. The management team started seedlings indoors in late winter, but miscalculated how long the cold Spring would drag on for. By the time it was warm enough to transplant, the “seedlings” had grown to 4-ft tall mature plants that were flowering in hopes of reproducing before their seemingly inevitable death. As a last attempt for survival, we dug trenches in the designated plot to bury the majority of each stem, with only the top-fourth of each plant sticking out of the ground. This encourages stronger roots. The technique worked, and we were able to produce enough tomatoes to share among gardeners and with the South Royalton Food Shelf, a small victory of the growing season!



Local Food in Your Community Grant

This past summer, the Community Garden partnered with Luna Bleu Farm to successfully apply for a [Local Food in Your Community](#) grant from the Vermont Agency of Agriculture, Food and Markets (VAAFM). We were awarded \$5,000 in August to “support and strengthen collaboration between communities and local producers,” which we aimed to do through short-term events and long-term planning. The grant project had two main components: 1.) on-farm harvest parties and demonstrational food workshops, and 2.) a needs-based assessment survey for a “Community Center for Agriculture” idea that the 4-Town Food Resiliency Committee is spearheading. You can read more about our grant project online, [here](#).

Farm Events

The Community Garden hosted four events total under the Local Food in Your Community grant, two involving Luna Bleu Farm and two involving Hurricane Flats Farm:

1. **Garlic Harvest Party at Luna Bleu Farm** Community gardeners joined other friends of the farm to help Luna Bleu harvest three 400-ft beds of garlic. Luna Bleu later wrote on their Instagram that they were expecting to pull and store only one 400-ft bed, but with the number of helping hands, the group was able to increase the amount of garlic harvested by roughly 200%.
2. **Home-Canning Workshop with Luna Bleu Tomatoes** The next event was a Food Demonstration Workshop co-hosted by Luna Bleu Farm and the Community Garden at First Branch Coffee Co. This workshop sampled what a circular economy might feel like, upcycling farm “waste” into nutritious food to share with our community for free. This was done by capturing the discarded (and delicious!) juice of tomatoes grown for seed and boiling it down into sauce - the perfect food for an educational workshop around home preservation. Participants learned how to properly process shelf-stable jars of tomato sauce, and gave Luna Bleu’s “Squeezeo” equipment a try while sampling the farm’s pressed apple juice and pickled garlic scapes. All 13 participants left with two quarts of free, organic Luna Bleu tomato sauce. To complete the full circle, participants also left with coupons for two free tomato seedlings for the farm’s annual Spring sale, which will be grown from the very seeds that were separated.
3. **Popcorn Workshop at Hurricane Flats Farm** The Community Garden hosted a second Food Demonstration Workshop at Hurricane Flats Farm in September, where 15 participants got a farm tour and learned about the entire popcorn-making process, from seeding the corn to drying and separating the kernels to bagging the final product. Grant money was used to reimburse the farm for providing free bags of organic popcorn to each participant.
4. **Sweet Potato Harvest** The final event was a sweet potato harvest party at the Community Garden. As mentioned, the sweet potatoes and the method for growing them came from Hurricane Flats Farm. With the number of volunteers who showed up, it only took one hour to harvest over 500 lbs of sweet potatoes by hand. All 13 volunteers left with a large box full of potatoes, and the remaining 150 lbs were delivered to the South Royalton and Sharon Food Shelves. We also discussed how to properly store and cure the sweet potatoes.

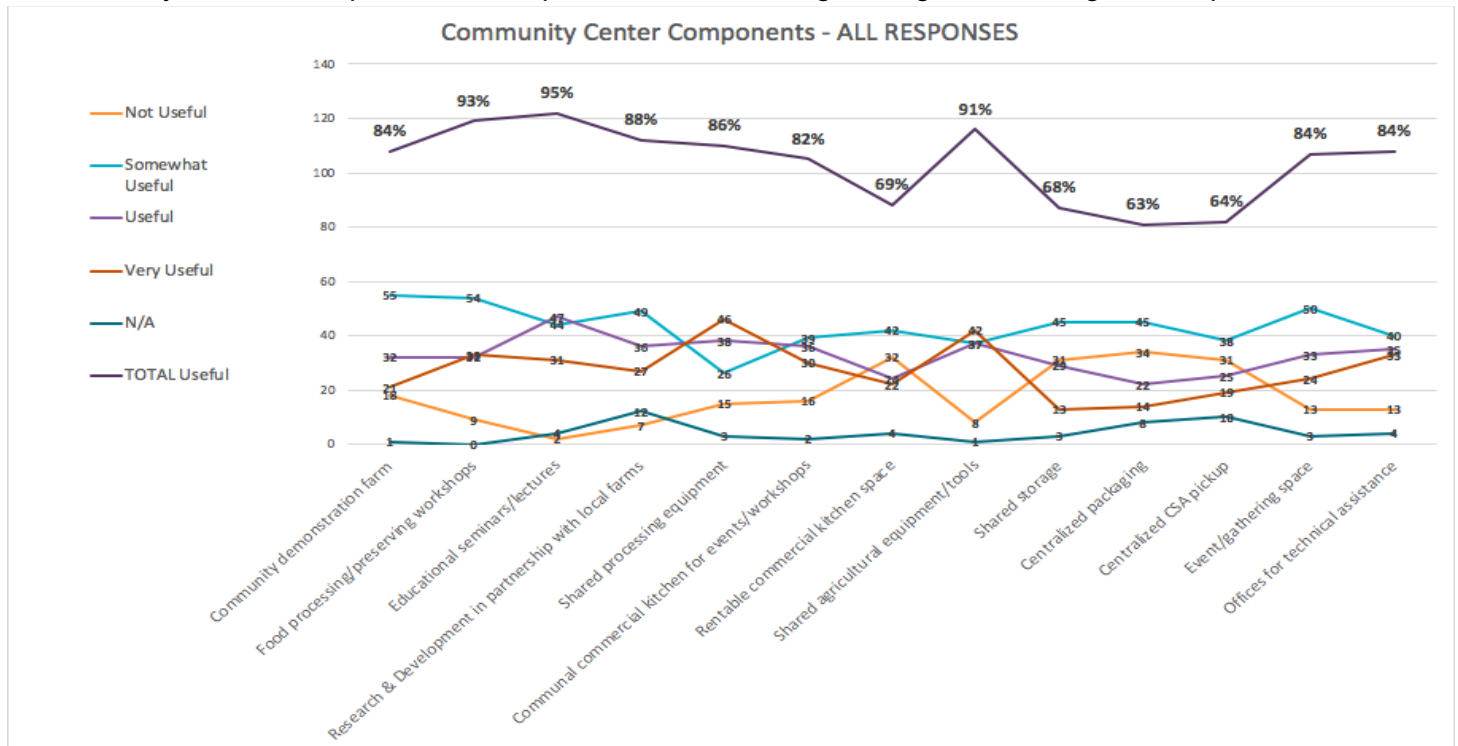
The Community Garden is eager to partner with more local farms to host similar events in the future, and we acknowledge that we must increase our farmer outreach in order to make these opportunities known. We plan to do just that. Farmers who are interested in partnering with the Community Garden to host an on-farm event can also contact Megan at sorocommunitygarden@gmail.com

Community Center for Agriculture: Survey Results

"These ideas sound great! I would like to help. To be a presenter as well as to learn cooperatively. Not having some of the machinery I need stops me from thriving in ways beyond what I currently do."
-Anonymous Survey Response, Homesteader

About the Survey

The Community Garden is a member of the 4-Town Food Resiliency Committee, which aims to develop educational, production and processing opportunities for entry level gardeners, established homesteaders, and small scale producers in the Royalton-Tunbridge-Strafford-Sharon region. The Committee is exploring a "Community Center For Agriculture" concept to achieve these goals, and the survey was designed to assess the feasibility of this concept based on expressed needs among the region's working landscapes.



Royalton is the most central location for 45% of respondents

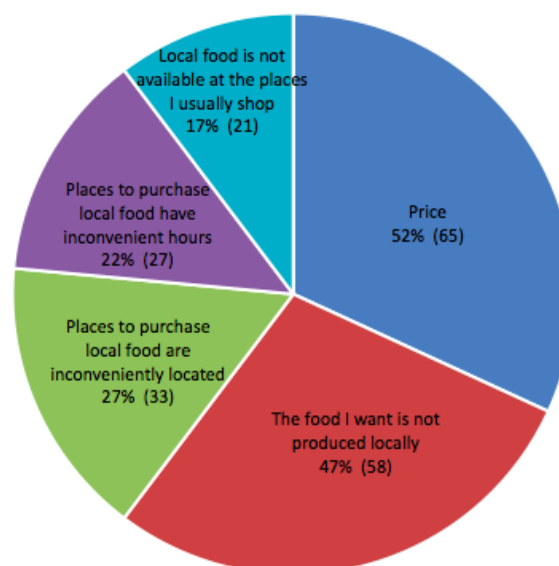
63% of farmers see plant nurseries as a market gap (not enough)

91% of homesteaders grow food to have affordable nutrition

The most popular option for shared infrastructure was seed saving utilities (53%), followed by vegetable preserving equipment (51%)

82% of respondents are interested in accessing more local food through *existing* retail outlets

What prevents respondents from accessing more local food (124 Total Responses)



Looking Ahead

Justice, Activism, Relocalization Seed Grant: Growing Medicine

The Community Garden was recently awarded a Justice, Activism, Relocalization Seed Grant to nurture the growing interest in medicinal herbs and food as medicine. This grant program is being administered by the local non-profits Building a Local Economy (BALE), Community Resilience Organizations (CROs) and Change the World Kids. We were awarded \$4,000 to 1.) install a temporary multi-use hoop house structure for all community gardeners and 2.) host a free, 6-part herbal education series that will introduce participants to family herbalism, easy-to-grow medicinal herbs, and basic medicine making skills.

The hoop house will expand our growing capacity and improve resource management as we will be able to grow high quality food and medicinal herb seedlings ourselves each year. The hoop house will also be used as an herb dryer later in the season, supporting community gardeners in preserving the harvest of herbs for culinary use, as well as making teas and other medicinal preparations. Regarding the education series, our community herbalist-in-residence, garden manager Elspeth Sherman, will teach on a variety of herbal topics with a focus on herbs that are widely applicable and techniques that are easy to incorporate into the flow of daily life. Workshops will include hands-on activities in the garden (harvesting, drying, processing) as well as medicine making. Participants will leave each workshop with an herbal preparation, and by the end of the season they will have completed their basic home remedies kit.

Support for Local Farms

The events and workshops that we hosted this year demonstrate how the Community Garden can help strengthen consumer-producer relationships in our region. Whether it's getting community gardeners on local farms to help with big harvests, hosting food demonstration workshops with local specialty crop producers, or celebrating the harvest with a community meal that feeds consumers and farmers alike, there are ample opportunities to use the central presence and people power of the Community Garden in a way that supports, and never competes with, local farms. We look forward to partnering with more farmers in the future to advance mutual goals of a resilient food system.

Educational Programming

In addition to the standard open gardening hours and the herbal workshop series described above, we are also exploring the possible development of a formal education program for school-aged children at the Community Garden. Starting with the 2021 growing season, we hope to partner with local afterschool programs to have the community garden be a "third space" where school-aged children can supplement their education with hands-on gardening lessons. Third spaces are meant to be a safe place where school-aged children can spend their time after school hours and before their parents get off work. We believe that the South Royalton Community Garden is a perfect third space option, where school-aged children can play, learn, and eat under supervision.

Fundraising Events & Online Presence

Many people asked to sign up for our newsletter or how to make a donation this year, but unfortunately the Community Garden lacks the infrastructure necessary to accommodate these requests. Starting with the 2021 growing season, we hope to establish a website where the Community Garden can share organic gardening resources, post events, accept donations, and, most importantly, be reachable to our community members. In addition, we are planning some exciting fundraiser events that we hope to be able to host with and for our community. We hope that these efforts will increase the productivity and efficiency of the Community Garden.

About the South Royalton Community Garden

Project Background

The Town of South Royalton has had a community garden for many years now. It was originally structured like most others, allowing for individuals to rent out private plots only. When Caroline Gordon became a student at Vermont Law School, she noticed that for two straight seasons, the garden space wasn't fully utilized, with about half fallow each summer. As a law student, Caroline didn't have time for a big project, but she could envision a collective effort to maximize space and produce more locally-grown produce. Caroline brings vocational training in biodynamic agriculture with her from Germany, and in 2018, she partnered with her coworker Elspeth Sherman (who has large-scale farm management experience) and reached an agreement with the former Garden Manager: they could manage the unused space if they provided volunteer opportunities and donated extra produce to the South Royalton Area Food Shelf. The new management team quickly grew to three as VLS graduate Megan Fuerst joined to manage garden communications and other administrative operations, specializing in the skills she brings from years of nonprofit experience. Together, the team transformed the community garden's fallow space into an "Open Space" for communal gardening and ag-related programming.

Meet the Management Team

Caroline Gordon was born in Germany and came to Vermont to engage in changing the law so that sustainable farming practices could become economically viable. She earned her LL.M. in Food and Agriculture Law and Policy from Vermont Law School and now works part-time as the Legislative Director for the agricultural grassroots and advocacy organization Rural Vermont. Before coming to Vermont, Caroline participated in a four-year training program in biodynamic agriculture in Germany. Aside from advocacy work, Caroline works as a cashier in the South Royalton Market and maintains gardening herself in a way that increases communal participation through the South Royalton Community Garden.

Elspeth Sherman has spent all of her adult life cultivating a relationship with plants and healing through art making, farming, and herbal studies. She began working with plants as a student in the BFA program at Carnegie Mellon University, where she created site specific gardens to playfully explore issues around natural resource management. After college, her attention shifted to organic agriculture. She spent 7 years as the farm manager of Suzie's Farm, a 140 acre diversified certified organic farm in the Tijuana River Valley of San Diego. She has farmed medicinal herbs at Suzie's Farm, at HerbPharm in Oregon, and at Free Verse Farm in Chelsea, VT. She moved to Vermont in 2016 to pursue a 3 year clinical training in herbal medicine at the Vermont Center for Integrative Herbalism. Growing food and medicinal herbs has powerfully deepened her sense of personal empowerment, resilience, and wonder — an experience she aims to share with her community in the garden and through her clinical herbal practice.

Megan Fuerst is a Cleveland native who moved to Vermont in 2017 to earn her Masters in Environmental Law and Policy from Vermont Law School. She now works as Legislative Associate for Action Circles, a non-profit lobbying firm that consults with clients to implement effective political strategies for progressive campaigns. Megan approaches this role with years of nonprofit experience under her belt, previously working as Chief of Staff for a youth-oriented environmental nonprofit based in the Bay Area, California. It was this organization that first introduced Megan to the importance of sustainable food systems, and her involvement in the South Royalton Community Garden was a natural outgrowth of Megan's learned passion for seasonal, locally produced, and organically grown food. Megan is also a lead Coordinator of Royalton's Mutual Aid group as well as a barista at First Branch Coffee, Co., where she enjoys the opportunity to mingle with her community. Megan and Caroline are Tunbridge residents, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and in the process of turning their home into an active farmstead.