



## **Calkins Park neighbors bond over veggies**

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Thirty families in Calkins Park neighborhood have discovered they share more than proximity. Novice or knowledgeable, they all are pioneering members of the Calkins Park Community Garden.



A stone's throw from Riverview Avenue, not far from Lawrence & Memorial Hospital, the garden of 30 raised beds has sprung up in the last four months at the site of a former playground, with backing from the Thames Valley Council for Community Action (TVCCA), guidance from F.R.E.S.H. (Food: Resources, Education, Security, Health), and willing volunteer organizers. The effort is part of Community Harvest Network (CHN), an effort to start up more community gardens in New London County, made

possible by an American Recovery and Reinvestment Act grant to TVCCA.

The Calkins Park gardens are an example of groundswell support and interest in home gardening, according to Audrey Blackburn. Having relied on the F.R.E.S.H. community garden at the corner of Williams and Mercer Streets in New London, she and boyfriend Conal O'Keefe hoped for one closer to their Pequot Avenue home.

When only three people showed up at the first meeting in late February in the basement of the Montauk Baptist Church, Blackburn said Emily Lerner, of F.R.E.S.H., cautioned them it might not happen.

"I felt, let's just get started, and once people see what we're doing, it will catch on," said Blackburn, who volunteered to handle the people coordination while O'Keefe figured out measurements and materials. "It's incredible, as we progressed; it's just taken off. We have such great people getting involved."

Between word-of-mouth and people stopping by to ask Blackburn and O'Keefe what they were plotting out on the old playground space, 30 plots were constructed, 28 were snapped up, and

all were planted in four months.

"There was a blank slate when we started," Blackburn said. "TVCCA let us forge out on our own, figure out what we wanted and needed, and provided the materials."

The group planned for in-ground beds, but when soil test results showed elevated lead levels, O'Keefe drew up detailed plans and estimates of linear feet of boards and cubic yards of soil, compost, and manure for 3- by 6-foot raised beds. TVCCA covered the \$2,500 upfront materials expenses. Gardeners are charged \$10 to \$20 to rent their plots for the year, and can grow anything they want.



"The gardens are very personalized. There are no rules about what you need to plant," said Blackburn, who calls her selection of tomatoes, onions, Brussels sprouts, cucumbers, and zucchini a middle-of-the-road mix. Others are raising artichokes, watermelons, and pumpkins. One woman is growing a cotton plant her father-in-law gave her to try.

The garden is "solely a group of neighbors," Blackburn said, ranging from 20-somethings to 60-somethings, and many families with children.

Montauk Baptist Church Pastor Stephen Heleman is one of the gardeners. Blackburn also credits Lisa and James Petty, Debbie and John Laughlin, and Anna and Stryder Teachworth as instrumental in getting the garden growing.

"Before this project started, we had never met, but we are now pulled together for a common cause, and our families have become good friends in the process," she said. "Already we are showing that community gardens can provide opportunities for neighbors to meet each other and build stronger ties to the community."



"Audrey and Conal have done a tremendous job in rallying people and getting the gardens going," said Marylou Underwood, TVCCA chief operating officer, who stops by the gardens on weekends. "You go there and see that whole group of people coming together, working together, making decisions together, little kids are playing together while Mom and Dad are working in a garden. It's a true community garden."

Two of the 30 beds are community beds, where all of the gardeners are expected to pitch in with caring for the plants and can enjoy a portion of the bounty.

"We also let anyone coming by, interested in the gardens, that they can pick anything out of the two community beds, for free," Blackburn said.

There's already a waiting list for the 20 to 30 more plots the organizers hope to put in for next year. The site has space for up to 100 beds, Blackburn said.

The neighborhood also is looking forward to a new playground, installed by the city at the other side of the park. The gardeners hope to hold a "grand opening, thanks for having us in the

neighborhood" party, with a potluck dinner and to show off the gardens, she said, to coincide with a planned playground opening.

The Calkins Park Community Garden has a Google Group and there is a CHN Facebook page. For more information, send e-mail to [calkinsparkgarden@gmail.com](mailto:calkinsparkgarden@gmail.com).