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CAWTHRON MARLBOROUGH ENVIRONMENT AWARDS

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JUDGES' REPORT

COMMUNITY INNOVATION

MARLBOROUGH COMMUNITY GARDENS

TE WHANAU KI WAIRAU KI MARA

INTERVIEWED

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JUDGES

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INTRODUCTION

Te Whanau ki Wairau ki Mara, Marlborough Community Gardens (MCG) is a remarkable community initiative tucked in behind the Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT). It epitomises the mission statement: "A welcoming outdoor community place where the focus is on people, sustainable productive gardening methods, learning, teaching and healthy food choices for the people of the Marlborough Region."

MCG's vision is to build a place, "Where people of all abilities will build friendships and promote health, wellbeing and sustainable gardening practices." The Committee members know who gardens each plot and while plot holders are responsible for maintenance, members ensure that people who may be struggling with the work are supported and given the help they need.



Marlborough Community Gardens was established in 2009 on the rich soil developed by Ralph Ballinger in the 1950s. It had been fallow for 20 years and took enormous effort to clear the weeds for gardening. Three years later some adjacent land was also acquired and now provides 74 garden plots serviced by more than 100 people. MCG has relationships with a wide range of commercial and not-for-profit organisations, including Marlborough Food Bank, Crossroads, At Risk Families, schools, disability groups, beekeepers, herbalists, and health and welfare organisations. Funded by annual plot rentals, donations and grants, MCG also receive donations such as seeds, fertilisers and garden implements from garden supply companies. Currently they are reasonably stable financially and any extra funding is put to good use.

In 2019 a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with NMIT and funding support came from the Nelson Marlborough District Health Board (NMDHB) and Marlborough District Council. MCG is now a registered charitable trust managed by trustees who are elected annually. The members are plot holders, who pay a small annual fee. There are also seven community plots for producing food to be distributed to charities.

GENERAL INFORMATION

The Trust has ensured that systems and processes are in place to be accountable for monies spent and received, and that the garden's objectives are honoured. A database of plot holders is maintained by the Treasurer along with the Gardens Manager and there is a clear process for plot allocation, access to the gardens and managing visitors. There are some well thought-out garden guidelines which embrace "the spirit of community gardening" and are monitored by all the members to ensure a positive, respectful experience for all.

Collaboration with NMIT has enabled projects to be designed and implemented, such as the carpentry students building a new shade house and new shelving in a tunnel house. Students have a real project from planning to construction and also get valuable experience mixing with the gardeners.

Monthly working bees are held with different objectives. These may be educational, such as a pruning demonstration, or general gardening practice and maintenance advice. These bring plot holders together for a social gathering and community building. There is a strong expectation that plot holders attend as the success of the gardens is through community participation and reciprocity.

A quarterly newsletter is produced with information on what to plant when and how to manage bugs and pests to ensure these don't spread to neighbouring plots. Individual gardeners are able to share their ideas and experiences and recipes are included so people learn how to utilise excess produce. Plot holder profiles introduce people to each other.

There is a strong ethos of building community; building the garden builds a vibrant community which in turn, through working together, develops learning and tolerance, community and culture. People from all walks of life and all cultures use this space. Local Pasifika people have a taro plot, elderly folk have established gardens to propagate seeds and plants to share and the kawa of the gardens through mihi whakatau and karakia indicates there is a strong commitment to te Ao Māori.



Underpinning the project is a strong belief in the health benefits of gardening – tilling the soil, planting and caring for plants, and then eating the produce which is fresh, healthy and inexpensive. In this spirit, a coordinator from the Primary Health Organisation (PHO) manages referrals for green prescriptions from GPs, Maataa Waka and He Piki Oranga. Two navigators have been assigned to this project. Initially, people are supported and then come of their own accord to garden in three plots specific to this group. This is highly successful with those who are committed and they benefit immensely from learning and sharing with others.

This community of gardeners tries to work sustainably in all they do and are cognisant of the relationship between soil and healthy plants. Education on the dynamics of soils and the need to put back nutrients and organic plant and natural materials – seaweed, blood and bone, fish fertiliser, etc, is a natural part of this garden.

Judicious watering via irrigation systems and heavy mulching helps to mitigate dryness in summer and crops are planted carefully where they will flourish. Seeds are collected and stored to be used the next year.

Waste is well managed with recycled plant containers for seedlings, and noxious weeds are removed to landfill. All other green waste is composted in large, well-managed wooden bins.

Plot holders are encouraged to plant species that will attract beneficial insects and birds, and chemical-free pest control is encouraged. A bee-friendly environment has been fostered by planting wild flowers around the boundary and in collaboration with NMIT's beekeeping course hives have been placed by the stop bank.

Indigenous bio-diversity via a Rongoā garden for traditional medicinal herbs is also being explored using the Māori framework Te Wheke developed by Rose Pere. Over 40 indigenous species focus on Rongoā and kai, and other plants such as harakeke and ti kouka can be used as weaving materials. It is anticipated that in the future tohunga will become involved.

THE JUDGES WERE IMPRESSED BY

- The focus of the garden - Creation of food security and food for the soul.
- The Vista – Visitors to the gardens come through the gate and are greeted by a beautiful view of interesting and well-tended plots. Each is different, but all represent their owner's preferences and needs.
- Commitment of the Committee – While the management is a 'light touch', it is evident that the formation of an Incorporated Trust has enabled them to be accountable for donations, to report back to the Charities Commission and clearly implement expectations and responsibilities of trust members and plot holders. There is evident pride in having got their organisational 'house in order' making it easier to manage the gardens.
- Sustainability - This is evident throughout the gardens with composting, mulching extensively, replenishing soils, watering carefully and judicious use of pesticides. Sustainability is a core value for the gardeners.
- Newsletters – This excellent, informative publication serves to inform plot holders of upcoming events, seasonal recipes, plot holder profiles, information about working bees and other items of interest such as soil science.

- Health and safety – Health and safety considerations are evident with thought put into paths, placement of plots and garden heights for the plots used by the elderly. First aid assistance is available at NMIT.
- Manaakitanga and support – All the committee members know who gardens each plot and who needs help and support. The stated values and ethos of MCG emphasise the importance of the gardeners looking out for each other and visitors are welcomed and made to feel part of the project - a clear commitment to manaakitanga. Plots maintained by the PHO are used for Green Prescription Activities and produce crops for low decile schools as well as taro for Pasifika seasonal workers.
- Te Ao Māori – It is heartening to see how Te Ao Māori is being woven into the philosophy of the garden, particularly around traditional and customary practices around land use. Identification of traditional healing plants as well as other uses, (food, building, clothing) and bringing in tohunga, will strengthen and consolidate this learning and contribute to the preservation of knowledge. Use of Mihi Whakataua and karakia normalises Māori practices into the day-to-day work of the garden.
- Building the garden's community - The emphasis on building a diverse community – a community of gardeners providing an environment to bring people and plants together – is to be commended and great efforts are being made to include everyone. A garden with kumara and taro, support for mental health consumers and PD folk, and solving access issues for others demonstrates these values.
- Community links – There are strong links and cooperation with other agencies, people and groups who can contribute to the welfare and development of the garden. All around the garden is evidence of people's contributions such as sheds, equipment, tunnel houses.
- Strong volunteer base - Everything is done by volunteers who are supported and educated through working bees and learning from each other. There are clear expectations of each individual's responsibilities and the fact that they are part of the working 'whole' of MCG.



PROBLEMS AND HOW THEY HAVE BEEN TACKLED

- Preparing the fallow land - Initially the condition of the land was daunting. Invasive weeds, twitch and compacted soil meant using Roundup and grubbers to clear the land. For some time, preparing the soil took all their time and energy but the initial thorough "clean" laid good foundations. While they still have to manage noxious weeds, they invested thought and time in developing a clear system of composting the good weeds and removing the others to landfill and it is now working well.
- Developing an organisational structure – Since the formation of an Incorporated Trust, the garden is now operating on a sound organisational base.
- Managing security – From time to time, tools, vegetables and other items have been stolen. Putting a fence around the gardens has mitigated this somewhat.

SUMMARY

Te Whanau ki Wairau ki Mara/Marlborough Community Gardens has come a long way in 10 years. From a weed infested wasteland, the gardens now grow fifty different types of vegetables, including kumara and taro. Surplus food is given to John's Kitchen and other charities or shared among gardeners.

Community gardens are “a place to begin” where novice gardeners can learn from others and there are opportunities for sharing and exchange. It is a low-stress place to relax, meet others, exercise and eat healthily. The ethos of this community initiative is captured in this statement from MCG – *“The future is not a place to which we are going, it is a place we are creating, the paths to the future are not found but made and the activity of making them changes the maker and the destination.”*

SUGGESTIONS

- Continue to explore chemical and pesticide-free approaches to pest management.
- Continue to engage with Iwi to develop and consolidate ideas around Rongoā Māori and traditional kai.
- Seek volunteers from a wider age group to think about succession for people on the committee.
- This gem for Blenheim needs to be recognised and we suggest developing a relationship with Garden Marlborough to support and promote its achievements.
- With Council resources and services along with NMIT and NMDHB, develop a network of Marlborough Community Gardens to encourage mutual learning and growing.