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## Community Garden gears up for new season, changes

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Associate Editor

While local weather stations announced new state highs last week, those in charge of organizing the Sun Prairie Community Garden are busy getting things set up for this summer's crop.

Located at 1330 Linnerud Drive next to the Sun Prairie Public Library, the Sun Prairie Community Garden was originally started in 1999 by the Sun Prairie Youth and Families Commission, former city council member Larry Olness and Sun Prairie Garden Club member Karen Bailey.

The community garden came from humble beginnings, with a mere 32 plots available that first year. As the years went on and interest boomed, the number of plots available increased, first to 60, then to 90, until finally in 2007, 143 plots were made available. Of those plots, 119 were rented last year, according to Marlene Cichy.

As the City of Sun Prairie has continued to grow and diversify, so has the garden.

Ralph Sugden, who has been a face at the community garden for 12 years, said many different people purchase plots for the summer, from young families with young children to older adults. Sugden said many different ethnic groups and nationalities make up the garden as well, reflecting Sun Prairie's increasingly diverse and multi-racial population.

"They all bring with them their style of gardening from their home country," Sugden said. "They don't have access or never been brought up to use any power tools for gardening, which are rototillers and cultivators, so it is all back work and hand work for them because that is the way they were brought up and that is the way they do it."

The garden also provided a chance for children at the Sacred Hearts Daycare to develop hands-on experience growing their own vegetables and learning about nature for the first time last summer.



Youth in last summer's Sacred Hearts Daycare cared for their own plot. Each grade planted two vegetables, which included tomatoes, carrots, potatoes, green beans, pumpkins and zucchini. At the end of the summer, the children reaped the rewards of their efforts as daycare staff used the vegetables in the children's snacks and meals. (Submitted photos)



Each grade planted two kinds of seeds, Daycare Director Marilyn Roelfs said. Then once a week, each grade went to the library to check out books and then traipse next door to their garden plot to plant, pull weeds and check on plant growth.

“Sometimes they would eat something fresh from the garden,” Roelfs said. “I think it made a connection where things came from and how much work it is to produce it.”

After the harvest, daycare staff incorporated the vegetables into the students’ snacks and meals.

“They got to sample it and everybody liked their vegetables,” Roelfs said. “Vegetables fresh from the garden taste so much better than buying them in the store in a can.”

Unlike previous years with the city in charge, the garden will be run primarily by volunteers this summer. While the city will still be in charge of collecting garden fees and related mailings, all other garden-related work is being handled by a newly-established committee, consisting of longtime garden members.

As garden leadership changes hands, so do the plans to improve the garden. According to Sugden, plans are underway to build a garden shed for tools and equipment storage on the land adjacent to the parking lot.

Sugden said another goal is to improve the garden’s low plots. There are between four and six plots that get very wet when it rains, Sugden said, and the plan it to improve the plots by filling them in with topsoil.

As of Monday, March 25, there were 43 full-size plots still available for purchase. Full plots measure 24 by 18 feet and cost \$35 for the summer; half plots measure 12 by 18 feet and cost \$17.50. Sugden said the half plots are all taken, but provisions are being made to make more available by splitting full plots in half.

Registration forms for garden plots can be picked up and returned to the Public Works Department at City Hall. Forms may also be mailed to Sun Prairie Public Works, Attn: Community Garden, 300 E. Main St., Sun Prairie, WI 53590.