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AND COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION

## Community Gardens in Times of Crisis

*Hear about how communities in the New River Valley have adapted and been supported by community gardens throughout the Pandemic. This short vignette is part of our “Virginia Food Systems and COVID-19 Story Collection Project” that aims to highlight, collect, and share stories of hope and resilience in our food system amidst the pandemic. Find out more about this project and view our entire series on [our website](#).*

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By Rachel Hall

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a spike in gardening all over the world. While most people will not grow enough food in their garden plot to feed themselves year-round, there is still a major benefit to growing your own produce. For one, gardening is an opportunity to grow foods that may be harder to find at your local grocery store. Second, gardening gets people connecting with their community and the earth which helps improve mental and physical health. Now more than ever community gardens are a lifeline.

Of course, gardening looks different now than before the pandemic. Increased safety measures in the Blacksburg community garden include mandated face masks, social distancing from other gardeners, and disinfecting hands before using the water hose. At the Radford community garden, community members decided formal restrictions are not necessary because there are typically no more than four people in the garden at a time. In addition to restrictions, the Blacksburg Hale garden has closed its communal tool shed and cancelled community gatherings such as potlucks and educational sessions.

Even with these restrictions in place people are finding ways to enjoy the garden. Matt Nottingham, a longtime gardener, still finds a lot of joy in getting out in nature.

“Even without the potlucks, I like the sense of getting out and going to a different place rather than working the home garden all the time,” he said. “Brenda [his partner] and I like seeing people we’ve come to know in the garden over the years. There’s a real sense of community here.”

Jenny Schwanke who coordinates Blacksburg’s Wong Park and Hale community gardens is hopeful that community gardening will continue to grow in popularity.

“I’d like to see community gardening in every neighborhood that could use one, especially in rental areas.”



*Jenny Schwanke, garden coordinator, working in the Wong Park Community Garden. Photo courtesy of Roanoke Times.*

It not just the gardeners who benefit from these spaces. Their positive effect reaches out to their larger communities in the form of donated produce to local food pantries such as Our Daily Bread, the Southpaw mutual aid organization, and the Interfaith Food Pantry in Blacksburg. In Radford gardeners have been donating produce to the Daily Bread Soup Kitchen. Fresh produce is essential in food pantries because the non-perishables that are commonly available are often high in sodium and other undesirable ingredients, which leads to negative long-term health effects for food insecure populations. In a time of crisis our communities are only as strong as our most vulnerable members. For this reason, our community gardens and our gardeners are essential to the collective health of our community.

#### **References**

Clauson-Wicke, S. (2020, September 27). Gardens growing community during a pandemic. The Roanoke Times. Retrieved from: [https://roanoke.com/news/local/gardens-growing-community-during-a-pandemic/article\\_9f64ad0f-2c6a-5726-96fd-f6d418c017bd.html](https://roanoke.com/news/local/gardens-growing-community-during-a-pandemic/article_9f64ad0f-2c6a-5726-96fd-f6d418c017bd.html)