



# CASE STUDY | HARVESTING LOCAL GIFTS AND ASSETS AT THE CENTENNIAL COMMUNITY GARDEN

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Community gardens have been popping up in cities across Canada and have been proven to have many health benefits such as promoting physical activity and reducing stress. The Centennial community garden in St. Catharines, Ontario has seen the immediate health benefits and also found the garden harvests more than food: it utilizes local gifts and assets. Centennial's community garden is an example of an empowering initiative that serves multiple purposes, with a host of benefits to the City of St. Catharines: "The Garden City."

## OVERVIEW

The Niagara region has a history embedded in agriculture. For over 10 years, the [Niagara Community Garden Network](#) has collaborated with local food security leaders to build over 600 community garden plots throughout dozens of locations in Niagara. The network provides tools, seeds, plants, and educational resources for people to gain gardening skills and brings recognition, awareness and public education to food justice and environmental issues. Simply put, gardening is transformative.

[Queenston Neighbours](#) is a network of individuals who live, work or play in the Queenston community. Since 2017, the network has hosted a monthly Community Roundtable: a neighbourhood conversation focusing on the resident experience and voice. Participation has included residents, businesses, community/not-for-profit organizations, faith-based groups, political representatives, public health and the Indigenous community. Of all the assets in Queenston, the community garden is perhaps the best example of how a municipality can work alongside partnering organizations and the leadership of its citizens.

### About the Centennial Community Garden

Centennial's community garden, located in the Queenston neighbourhood of St. Catharines, is one of the largest and most active community gardens in Niagara. Located in an ethnically diverse area of Niagara, this garden hosts a "no barriers" approach to involvement. With over 50 plots and growing, this garden on City property helps support under-resourced groups access food and participate in their community. As part of their commitment to community engagement, the garden actively partners with Queenston Neighbours, a neighbourhood network.

## LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

### Role of the Municipality

Centennial's community garden is hosted on public property and endorsed by the [City of St. Catharines](#). In 2017, the City put a call out for a community group to support the garden's future. Had Queenston Neighbours not stepped up to help, the garden would've been turned back into grass. In addition to providing public space for the community garden, the City also provides access to water and financial supports through a standard Partnership Agreement with Queenston Neighbours. Moreover, City staff bring passion and expertise to the partnership which allows the garden to grow. The City has maintained a cost-sharing funding arrangement enabling the purchase of lumber, soil, rain barrels, and tools to expand and maintain plots as directed by the gardeners. In 2019, residents helped install a shed to house communal tools through available city funding.

### Providing an Essential Service

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted vulnerabilities in communities, including issues of loneliness and food insecurity. The Queenston neighbourhood is home to many essential services for marginalized people, many of whom are experiencing homelessness or living with the effects of poverty. With an opportunity to support mental and physical health while increasing access to healthy food, community gardens have become more important than ever.

With many relying on community gardens as a source of food and social connection, gardens serve significant roles for citizens, especially low-income earners. Thankfully, through ongoing advocacy and education from food justice groups, the Province classified community gardens as an essential service in 2020. With appropriate physical distancing and sanitation practices in place, the Centennial community garden continues to grow food for those who need it most.

### Finding Mutually Beneficial Partnerships

Centennial's community garden has developed into a neighbourhood asset through intentional partnership and resident leadership. This crossroad of collaboration is a space that encourages community to have a voice and take the lead. Here, stakeholders are neighbours, the municipality and supporting organizations, like the Niagara Community Garden Network.

The Niagara Community Garden Network supports by:

- Hosting monthly learning sessions for gardeners and garden coordinators
- Supporting the layout, design and logistics of starting new community gardens
- Conducting ongoing site visits and providing staff support to assist gardeners
- Sharing best practices, available resources and new funding opportunities
- Building partnerships and advocacy through the Niagara Food Security Network
- Highlighting success stories told from the gardener's perspective

**“What I like best about coming to the Centennial garden is the peace, the escape - it's our home away from home, and the kind people.”**

- Assisting with securing new funding to expand community garden opportunities
- Writing reports and providing ongoing community updates on their programs

## THE ROLE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN SUSTAINING COMMUNITY EFFORTS

### The Value of Social Capital at Centennial Garden

One way to think about social capital is to think about the benefits of our social connections. Being connected to and caring for others, participating in community life and taking collective action are integral for building social capital. Centennial's community garden is a place where relationships flourish through sharing stories, knowledge and experiences. In addition to improving health outcomes, participating in the garden brings a greater sense of belonging.

### Fostering Leadership From Within

By investing in relationships built on trust, Centennial's community garden empowers gardeners to take ownership and lead from within. All gardeners are encouraged to help shape the space and experience of the community garden. This process follows principles of [Asset-Based Community Development](#) which focuses on building what's strong in a community and not focusing on what's wrong. In spite of other local challenges, the garden continues to grow.

Centennial's community garden coordinator, Caleb Ratzlaff, holds a facilitation, mediation and animation role. Caleb views this role as *"enabling participants to garden and connect, while taking on an administrative and facilitator role."* Starting this position 3 years ago, Caleb has built trust with gardeners through consistency and follow through, and by actively gardening himself - literally getting his hands dirty! Caleb actively encourages gardeners to see themselves as community leaders. By highlighting gardener's ideas, suggestions and talents, they are given space to lead workshops and provide much respected mentorship and direction.



Examples of citizen-led leadership include:

- **Grassroots Community Design** – The garden coordinator recruited and reached out to various gardeners who expressed interest in leadership roles. Garden leaders continue to help design and shape the garden's future. With a level of ownership and redistribution of authority, gardeners have been able to build a space that is reflective of their local neighborhood.
- **Support Stories and Highlight History** – At Centennial, one of the gardeners has been involved since the beginning of the community garden. This type of commitment and resident leadership is irreplaceable and invaluable to a project and community's long-term success. The expert gardener acts as a local historian and is a wealth of knowledge; educating others on the significance of the land and environment.

## Creating Equitable Spaces

Centennial's community garden in Queenston has established a "barrier-free opportunity" for access to anyone who wants to grow their own food. Plot costs for those facing economic disadvantage are covered free-of-charge. Priority registration is given to those who do not otherwise have access to green space and are experiencing food insecurity. Ongoing community conversations through the Queenston Community Roundtable ask for suggestions from gardeners to help improve the site design by increasing accessibility and enhancing safety in the park. Providing equitable access for community involvement - particularly in public spaces - creates much needed opportunities for under-resourced socio-economic groups to belong.



An example of an equitable partnership is with [Westview Centre4Women \(WC4W\)](#). The drop-in centre provides several essential services for women in the neighbourhood including a low-cost food pantry, self-care services, and a dedicated gathering place and resource centre. Community garden plots are reserved for women involved with WC4W who want to garden together and grow their own food.

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Building Capacity for Year-Round Success

While there is often capital funding to initiate community gardens, seeking long-term funding for skilled human resources (such as garden coordinators, educators, etc.) can be a challenge. Community gardens benefit from empowered citizens taking the lead and finding solutions. However, great opportunity exists for future funding to be made available to ensure skilled coordination is in place to support the success of community gardens as year-round endeavours.

### Accommodations

Continuing to identify and advocate for more equitable community involvement is an ongoing topic of conversation at the Queenston Community Roundtable. Simply put, life is expensive and offering low-cost/no-cost opportunities is vital in neighbourhoods like Queenston. Providing financial compensation for garden coordinators, for example, would further validate the positive impact community gardens have in our society. These leadership opportunities could provide much needed financial support for low-income earners, as well. Additionally, ensuring basic accommodations are provided when required (like transportation, childcare, emotional support, etc.) will continue to ensure community gardens are welcoming places for all residents.

### Support from the Municipality

St. Catharines is a compassionate city that continues to endorse community gardens in several locations, including Queenston. The City's investment in Centennial's community garden not only enhances recreational opportunities for its citizens, but also encourages people to grow and share their own food.

This is truly a win-win situation and has a multitude of benefits for individuals, the community and the natural environment. The City's leadership is appreciated.

### A Beautiful Backdrop

Centennial's community garden hosts ongoing workshops open to the public. Groups from around Niagara have gathered in the garden to learn about its success and admire its growing ambition. When the weather allows, Queeston Neighbours use the community garden as a beautiful backdrop for their monthly Community Roundtable. The community garden is a place of inspiration, growth and potential in a neighbourhood full of passionate, dedicated and generous neighbours. Visitors are often taken aback by its beauty, especially in full bloom!

## NEXT STEPS

### Sustained Funding

Centennial's community garden looks forward to continuing to be a welcoming public space where both food and relationships are grown. Since 2017, interest in plots has grown as word continues to get out about the positive outcomes that are happening in the Queenston neighbourhood. With a need to cover administration and physical infrastructure costs, accessing multiple funding sources will be key to keeping the community garden operational. This year's focus is on building 10 new, accessible plots, adding signage and continuing to provide sanitation supplies to ensure the garden is used safely within COVID-19 protocols.

### Tracking Impact

With increased capacity to host gardeners and visitors, there are exciting opportunities to showcase the impact the community garden is having on the extended Queenston neighbourhood. Continuing to track the garden's impact is an important step of evaluation. Recognizing and celebrating community engagement and development progress gives community partners and funders strong local examples of collaboration strategies that work to the benefit of residents and address important community issues like food insecurity, community involvement and a changing climate.

## CONCLUSION

Centennial's community garden in Queenston is one example of how multiple partners can create the conditions for citizens to connect. With a dedication to forming mutually beneficial relationships, this initiative is an example of building social capital. The approach towards managing this community garden is asset-based, placing citizens at the center. Established as an essential service, community gardens not only address food insecurity but also provide a safe space for all participants to form meaningful relationships; with one another, their community and the natural environment. We encourage you to grow a community garden!

**“A lot of forms of recreation are happening outdoors such as Community Gardens. That is an example of a recreation as a form of re-creation.”**

Dr. Trevor Hancock

## RESOURCES

- Listen to podcast - [Social Reconnection as a Solution for Health](#)
- View [10 - A Guide for Community-Based COVID Recovery](#)
- Learn about [Assest-Based Community Development](#)

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