

Peace and Plenty Community Garden

A Southside Community Landtrust Garden
91 Peace Street, Providence



We invite you to become familiar with the story of Peace and Plenty Community Garden. As with any history, the following is subject to revision as new information comes forth. If you know some of the garden's history or have had a connection with the garden which will enrich the telling of its history, let us know.

Garden Facts...

The soil was believed to be first turned in 1987.

Garden size = 186' x 96'

Plot fees are \$20 - \$30 per season, depending upon plot size.

The garden is owned by Paolino Properties, owner of the former St. Joseph's Hospital. Gardener Chia Vue and her family were part of a group of original gardeners who began to transform the abandoned house lots into what you see today.

The garden is a Southside Community Landtrust Garden (SCLT).

SCLT provides administrative and garden maintenance, improvement and advice along with compost, water, seeds, straw, organic pest control products and a stipend for garden leaders.

To learn more about SCLT, scan this QR code:

To register for a garden plot call: 401-273-9419



Number of Plots and Gardeners...

In 2014...

There were 22 plots with 3 people from the immediate neighborhood gardening.

In 2019...

There were 46 plots with 39 gardeners, 27 living in the immediate neighborhood.

In 2023...

There were 50 plots with 44 gardeners, 32 living in the immediate neighborhood.

Notable Gardener Demographics...

The faces in the garden look like the faces in the neighborhood.

Garden demographics change from season to season. The garden beginnings saw a high number of Hmong gardening. In the 2023 growing season, gardeners were from Congo, Liberia, The Gambia, Laos, Bhutan, Burma, Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, Cape Verde, Azerbaijan and the US (African, European and Asian roots).

Languages spoken are Swahili, Spanish, Nepali, French, Portuguese, Hmong, Creole, Thai, Arabic, Kirundi, Karen (a Burmese dialect), and English.

Gardens Build Community...

Both the garden, as well as Peace and Plenty Park across the street, have become significant and formative neighborhood assets. They provide gathering points where neighbors meet neighbors and together build a greater psychological sense of neighborhood belonging and community.

Gardeners are encouraged to know their garden neighbors which leads to deepening social bonds, cultural awareness and things like crop and seed sharing.

Most grow for home use. Some grow for therapeutic uses.

Some are market gardeners who sell in local farmers markets.

Garden plots have also been planted by local agencies including Dorcas International, the YMCA, Center for Southeast Asians and Elmwood Nursing and Rehabilitation. One gardener is a professional herbalist.

An Evolving Way of Gardening...

Over the years, methods of gardening have evolved to embrace more of a regenerative approach and a renewed appreciation for the role that trees, weeds, wildlife, insects and invertebrates play in the garden landscape.

We are presently experimenting with permaculture and rewilding approaches.

Thinking about how the garden relates to and serves the larger neighborhood in which the garden is located is also a part of the garden's evolution.

Garden Workdays...

Garden workdays are required by participating gardeners.

There are nine monthly scheduled workdays from March through November, usually scheduled in the morning of the third Saturday of the month. In cases of rain, the following Sunday is the rain date.

Gardeners agree to attend at least 3 of the 9 workdays and, if gardeners cannot meet this requirement, they agree to take on alternative tasks.

The purpose of the workdays is to care to the garden as a whole and contribute to its overall maintenance and betterment.

It is not a time to only work in one's own plot.



Building Out the Garden Infrastructure...

Adding New Plots

Since 2014, 28 new plots have been added to the garden. In one large section (in the northwest corner of the garden) there were no defined plots. In this area, 12 new plots were created. Once they became available, other larger plots in the garden were divided to create smaller plots. Smaller plots are critical in a community garden as they are offered to new gardeners with no or little gardening experience and to those who may want a smaller plot. New plot boundaries, when created, often using fallen tree limbs instead of purchasing milled lumber. New walkways needed to be added along with widening several walkways to allow for safe walking and wheelbarrow access.

A Sculptured Arched Entrance and Vine

Take note of the arch framing the garden's Peace Street entrance and the sculptural metal art vine along the top of the fence. This was created and installed by the Steel Yard in 1998. If you study the design, you will notice the incorporated recycled shovels and garden rakes. The arch gives this entrance a focal point that invites attention to the garden. Further, it enlivens and softens the feel of the garden's chain link fence.

The Oasis Rain Barrel Shelter

Designed and constructed by Down City Design in 2015 with students from the Nathan Bishop Middle School, this shelter provides shade and an area to relax, socialize and conduct garden business. The rain barrels provide a passive supply of water for crops and birdbaths. Note the green color of the structure's framework matches the green in Peace and Plenty Park across the street.

The Tool Shed

Designed and built by Youth Build in 2017, the tool shed is a critical resource which greatly aids in the care for garden and the environs. Made possible with a grant from the New England Grassroots Foundation with additional money raised for the purchase of tools that gardeners have access when needed.

A Legislative Grant from Representative Grace Diaz also made tool purchase possible.

The Outdoor Gallery

Initiated in 2017, the goal is for the gallery to provide art that tells the story of this slice of the northern Elmwood neighborhood. As you can see, the artwork presents images and text that reflects the community back to itself.

The gallery further serves to transform and soften the previously unadorned chain link fence into a field of colorful artwork for all to enjoy.

Adding sculpture and art inside the garden is also part of this project.

Many thanks to students at the Sackett Street School, Cityside at Wheeler, MET School, neighbors, gardeners, friends and ACT for helping to make this a reality.

The Free Stand

In 2018, a free stand was placed at the garden's main gate so that the garden's bounty could be shared with neighbors and passers-by alike, no questions asked.

Thanks goes to our early partnership with Produce in the Parks for food donations and to gardeners who continue to generously share their produce.

In 2023, a MET School student designed and built a permanent Free Stand structure. This unit allows us to carry on the garden's tradition of sharing with the community.

A Little Free Library

In 2018, we inherited the Little Free Library (LFL) from Peace and Plenty Park across the street. The LFL sits on the picnic table inside the garden with gardening books and other resources for gardeners, including the garden manual.

A Food and Pollinator Corridor

During the COVID lock down, gardeners and volunteers took down 60+- weed trees inside the perimeter of the garden fence, created brick borders and prepared the soil to plant many varieties of perennial producers. They include: apple and pear trees, grapes, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries and strawberries along with rhubarb, Jerusalem artichokes, asparagus and elderberry.

Pollinator-friendly flowers and herbs were also introduced. Species like lavender, stinging nettle, sage, rosemary, thyme, salvia, yarrow, butterfly bushes, bee balm, cone flower, cardinal flowers, tiger lilies, columbine, lupine and more.

The food corridor was supported with a generous donation from Hope's Harvest.

The Mulch Corridor

A mulch corridor is a planned area where leaf mold and organic matter is allowed to remain undisturbed to support invertebrate populations. Many of these invertebrates are beneficial to the garden and provide a food source for other wildlife like songbirds. After a few years of observing the ground habitat underneath the wonderful pin oak tree just outside the garden's northeast corner, we intentionally built out a similar habitat in the walkway at the back of the garden in 2021. We call this a mulch corridor. The pin oak taught us how, with several years of dropped leaves, it provides a complex layered habitat for invertebrates to successfully establish and fulfill their life cycles. Organisms regularly found in mulch include: isopods, diplopods and nematodes, like crickets, centipedes, ants, beetles, earthworms, spiders and many micro-invertebrates. We observed that invertebrate populations can become re-established in an introduced mulch ecosystem. Nature is able to spring back when supported in the right ways. We renew and replenish the mulch corridor with collected leaves, especially in the fall. Since we began the mulch corridor, we have seen an increase of garden-friendly invertebrate neighbors including crickets, millipedes, centipedes and earthworms. An additional benefit: the leaves eventually decompose to create new soil.

Bird Baths and a Butterfly Tumbler

In the 2021 drought, squirrels were observed digging up potatoes and scurrying up the trees with them. "Potatoes?", we asked as we had never observed this before. We came to understand that this was an adaptive behavior, an adaptive behavior to drought-like conditions. The squirrels were thirsty. Potatoes provided the squirrels needed water. Bites out of tomatoes, corn and squash are not uncommon to us but we had never before witnessed squirrels taking potatoes. Our solution: to install three bird baths to provide water for our squirrel friends to drink and, at the same time, provide drinking and bathing water for our feathered friends. A neighbor donated one bird bath with a hummingbird platform to make it possible for these tiny friends to also safely bathe. Thinking about how to support our wildlife visitors, also led us to create our first ever butterfly tumbler where butterflies can safely drink and get needed nutrients.

A Kitchen Scrap Compost Site

In 2022, the garden partnered with Harvest Cycle to place the first ever kitchen scrap collection site in the Elmwood neighborhood. A MET School student designed and built the unit as a senior project. The unit is situated on the sidewalk in front of the garden. It has a handy combination lock which allows members access. Harvest Cycle, the MET School and Peace and Plenty Community Garden provided funds for the build. Duncity Design provided space, tools and construction supports in the building process. Ground Works RI helped to transport the unit to the site. Students at Cityside Wheeler designed and created on-unit signage in 2023. It was then unveiled as a community event.

Water Access

In 2023, as a response to the discouraging impacts of the drought of 2022, Southside Community Landtrust installed new water lines to quadruple the number available from one to four.

Composting and Compost Use...

Since the garden's beginning, compost has been added to the soil to improve soil health, conserve water, promote healthier plant growth, prevent soil erosion and address climate and weather challenges.

The garden does not have an official composting system. Gardeners agree to return all organic materials back into the soil, except invasive species which are removed from the garden.

In the beginning of each growing season, a delivery of 20 cubic yards of top grade compost is delivered to the garden. The April workday is dedicated to its equitable distribution. Many hands on deck, including volunteers, help to make sure every plot gets its fair share.

Weeds in the Garden...

As you might imagine, weeds in the garden are an ongoing subject of attention.

Weed Management

Different weed management practices have varied over the years with differing measures of success. Since poisons, such as herbicides, are not allowed in the garden, methods that interrupt weed life cycles such as mowing, pulling, and digging out weeds, along with a variety of herbal treatments, have been implemented. On occasion a mix of vinegar and salt have been specifically employed to interrupt root growth of a few especially challenging weeds like poison ivy and trees of heaven.

Weed Identification and Use

During the COVID pandemic in 2020, we began to do a weed inventory in the garden. This revealed what some gardeners already knew: that many weeds are edible and, indeed, highly nutritious. Species such as chickweed, dandelion, wild onion, lamb's quarters, plantain, amaranth, purslane, stinging nettle, lamb's ears and wood sorrel began to be more widely appreciated as potential food sources.

Some weeds have noted medicinal qualities. Some weeds are not edible, even toxic. The inventory also revealed several invasive species such as mugwort, bindweed, amaranth, wild onion and fish mint which require ongoing removal in order keep them from spreading as they will throughout the garden.

A future plan is to complete a thorough weed inventory, develop a weed manual and a signage system which tells which weeds are edible or medicinal and which weeds have invasive, poisonous or toxic qualities. Including recipes with this information, may help to elevate the appreciation of weeds as a food source and encourage their use.

Weed Islands

In 2021, weed Islands were intentionally introduced into different locations in the garden to attract and provide habitat to beneficial invertebrates. These islands, where weeds are allowed to grow, are managed to ensure compatibility with the best food growing practices. These islands do something that mowed areas do not: they collect morning dew, shade the ground which helps to conserve moisture and cool the soil., and attract beneficial insects.

The Role of Trees...

Where there were only 6 street trees in 2008, there are now 120+ planted in the immediate garden environs. Trees in the environs of the garden offer an array of proven benefits to our garden's overall health and well-being. Thanks goes to the City Forester of the Providence Parks Department, the Providence Neighborhood Planting Program, neighbors, friends and the many volunteers who have helped to both plant and continue to care for our valued street trees.

The Talking Tree Project

This venture, announced in 2023, focuses on three trees flanking Peace and Plenty Community Garden.



The three trees include a venerable sycamore, a dying silver maple (both street trees) and another silver maple located at the back of the garden in a neighbor's yard. Observe that the latter is almost completely taken over by an advancing, yet non-parasitic, English ivy. From the vantage point of Peace and Plenty Park, these trees form a perfect triangle. **These trees, like all trees, have stories to tell.**

The Talking Tree Project encourages you to look at each of these trees and ask them, "If you had something to say, what would you tell me?"

No doubt, when you listen to what they have to say, you will become curious and formulate questions to ask. And, if you are interested in taking your interest further by doing some research, writing a poem, creating art or making music, let us know.

We thank the partners in this project: the Providence City Forester, the Partnership for Providence Parks, the Providence Neighborhood Planting Program, Providence Parks Urban Wildlife Refuge Partnership and 15 Minute Field Trips.

The project is funded in part by a Legislative Grant for Representative Grace Diaz.

Flowers in the Garden...

Flowers are introduced into the garden for botannic diversity, beauty and to attract beneficial wildlife, especially pollinators. Interplanting flowers in vegetable plots is becoming more common. A few years back, gardeners removed an existing asphalt driveway in the southwest corner of the garden to create a new growing area.

This seemed like the perfect spot to create a flower island within the garden.

To achieve this, perennial day lilies were introduced along with a variety of natives along with annual varieties such as zinnias, asters, marigolds, portulaca, cosmos and dahlias for color and summer long blooms.

The location of this garden gives this corner of the garden a distinctive 'wild island' effect. Weeds are encouraged to grow in this flower island to bring in a greater diversity of plant species and wild pollinators.

Flowers can be picked by gardeners for home use and put out in the Free Stand for neighbors and passers-by to take and enjoy.

Wildlife Joys, Challenges and Assumptions...

Squirrels

The garden has a thriving gray squirrel population. Many nest in the silver maple tree across the back fence in our neighbor's yard. One season, during a hot drought spell, thirsty squirrels were observed digging potatoes out of the ground and carrying them up a tree. What was our response? To provide them with water as a drinking source by adding bird baths to the garden. The birds also love them.

Rabbits and Bats

A cottontail rabbit, previously unreported in the garden, was spotted just before the drought in 2022. In 2023, rabbits have since been observed with a bit more frequency. Brown bats are sometimes seen flying over the garden in the evening as they catch insects. We have often thought of putting up bat nesting boxes to help address the mosquito population in the garden.

Did you know? The northern long-eared bat is listed as endangered in Rhode Island.

Rats, Mice and Cats

Like anywhere else in the city, the garden experiences rats, mice and cats.

Rats

Two kinds of rats are seen in the garden.

There is a larger brown rat and the smaller black rat which can climb. The black rat presents a more unique challenge for food growing because it can climb.

Rats often take bites out of produce like tomatoes or squash as they look for water. They also dig underground burrows, which are found in the garden with some regularity, mostly along the back fence. They can nest and shelter under almost anything: piles of branches, construction debris and even garage foundations.

People sometimes blame community gardens for rats while they may not realize that home yard and garbage maintenance practices are also critical to control rodent populations. Each night, rats can travel up to 300 feet in search of food. Residential and commercial properties, with less than adequately managed conditions, provide food and shelter for rats, and can contribute to the number of rats in the garden.

Poisons are not used to reduce the rodent population. If used, these poisons would be introduced into the garden soil with negative and long-lasting impacts. Poisons can also be ingested by cats, hawks and owls, who hunt rodents as a food source, causing lethal secondary poisonings.

Mice

There are four kinds of mice in Rhode Island: field mice, house mice, eastern deer mice and white-footed eastern deer mice. Mice, along with their rat cousins, are opportunists who live well off the garbage waste of human populations.

Cats

Both feral and pet cats visit the garden, mostly to hunt.

Cats are noted indiscriminate killers of wildlife, including songbirds. However, along with birds of prey and other mammals, they contribute to rat population control.

Mammals Not Seen in the Garden

Although seen in the wider Elmwood neighborhoods, including Roger Williams Park, we have not seen chipmunk, raccoon, skunk, fisher, coyote, opossum, red fox, white tail deer or groundhog either in the garden or in close proximity.

Groundhog and white tail deer can be especially destructive to garden habitats.

Feathered Friends

Mockingbirds, robins, house sparrows (also known as English sparrows) and mourning doves are the wild bird species most often seen in the garden. Occasionally a red tailed hawk is spotted flying over or sitting in a nearby tree.

A Wild turkey was seen for the first time during the COVID pandemic in 2020. This female had nine baby poults, which meant that a male must have also been nearby. For some unknown reason, when her poults were small, we stopped seeing her.

Hummingbirds are spotted occasionally in summer. We planted a hummingbird garden to attract more of them, and in 2022, a colorful hummingbird feeder was introduced.

The shortlist of birds we are hoping to attract are: cardinals, blue jays, nuthatches, chickadees, titmouse, Baltimore orioles, crows, house sparrows, woodpeckers, cow birds, cat birds, wild turkeys, hawks and owls.

Reptiles

No varieties have been reported, including indigenous snakes or turtles. Some wonder what the beneficial role of reptiles, say the garter snake, would be in the garden.

Bees, Butterflies, Moths and Skippers

Bees, butterflies, moths and skippers are critical species for successful pollination. While we see them in the garden, we believe there has been a noted decline in numbers during the past few years. A goal of our rewilding efforts is to reverse this suspected downward trend.

We are often asked the excellent question, “Why does the garden not have bee hives.” Bee hives have been part of the garden conversation for years but in order to introduce hives, we would need an experienced bee hive manager and solid understanding and agreement with gardeners and near neighbors.

There is mounting evidence to support attracting bees via natural methods, like planting pollinator attractors, is the best way to bolster healthy native populations.

Invertebrates

Many invertebrates in all their different stages of life, egg, larval and adult forms, are found in the garden but there has not been a survey, similar to BioBlitz. We would be interested in that becoming a reality.

Some of the invertebrate species found in the garden include: butterflies, fritillaries, moths, bees, wasps, hornets, beetles, flies, gnats, ants, praying mantis, ladybugs, aphids, crickets, casement bugs, centipedes, millipedes, earwigs, wolf spiders, black beetles, lacewing, and mosquitoes.

Creating ever-increasing and healthy, balanced wildlife habitats is one of the garden goals: the benefits of which will lead to future gardening successes.

Standing water, not including the few well attended to bird baths, is not allowed in the garden. Standing water serves as a mosquito breeding site.

Community Involvement...

Community Service and Volunteer Opportunities

Community service and volunteerism are key components to keeping the garden well cared for and ensuring that the garden continues to present itself as a good neighbor to the community. The Wheeler School, Groundwork RI Green Team, Youth Build, Southside Community Landtrust Youth Group, MET School, Neighborhood Church, CharterCARE Health Partners, Lincoln School, Southeast Asian Young Professionals, Moses Brown School and many more including neighbors, family and friends who have volunteered their time to help make the garden what it is today.

The Outdoor Classroom

Initiated in 2015 as a means to create garden access for neighborhood youth while including an opportunities to meaningfully experience the garden in its many aspects, the Outdoor Classroom made it possible for hundreds of neighborhood youth to have meaningful access to the garden, and reap its benefits. In 2016, the Center for Southeast Asians and Southside Community Landtrust created a summer program for neighborhood kids to learn about gardening and nature. The park across the street is where kids had lunch and played.

Invasive Challenges

Over the years, several species of invasive plants have found their way into our garden. Primary among them are: mugwort, spearmint, wild onion, bindweed, stinging nettle, amaranth, garlic mustard, fish mint, Norway maple and English ivy.

Some have medicinal and food value however, many invasives have growth mechanisms and growth patterns which can give them a distinctive competitive edge over crops being grown in the garden. Rhizomatous root systems travel underground and have nodules along the root system that generously send out new plants. In the case of bindweed, these roots systems are reported to grow up to 20 feet.

Their removal from garden plots and walkways requires vigilance, time and effort.

Digging them out in a manner that teases as much of the root system out of the ground, without breaking them, seems to be the best way to discourage their spread.

Mowing, although disruptive to their growth cycle, doesn't appear to be an effective control measure, as it does not remove the root systems.

Some invasives produce hundreds, even thousands of seeds, some viable for 50 years. For several years, we experienced overwhelming amaranth and bindweed blooms throughout the garden which necessitated an inordinate amount of attention. Several community service groups and volunteers assisted in their removal.

A few years ago, poison ivy established itself in a non-food-growing area. We were able to cordon the area off until it was eradicated. It took a few growing seasons to fully eradicate using a variety of natural methods. The summer drought of 2022 was actually an ally in this effort, along with applications of vinegar and salt.

Trash and Litter

Over the years, gardeners and volunteers have removed an inordinate amount of trash from the garden itself and from the garden's environs. Unfortunately, this remains an ongoing focus. Litter, often small bits of degraded plastic and styrofoam, seem to constantly blow into the garden from many directions.

It is important to ensure that non-biodegradable and potentially toxic litter does not get worked into the soil in which food is being grown.

The garden trash policy requires gardeners to take any trash out of the garden and throw away in their home trash bins.

The garden has no internal trash cans. However, the park across the street does. Our good neighbor policy keeps lines of communication open with neighbors when there is a trash or a different concern that affects the garden, or visa versa.

The Call for Rewilding

Imagine, in a more perfectly balanced natural urban landscape, we would see many more native species in our garden, our park and in our neighborhood.

We invite you to wonder about the absent species and the types of silence they bring: species like songbirds, owls, toads, chipmunks, salamanders, garter snakes, katydids, leaf hoppers, praying mantises, walking sticks, dragonflies, fireflies and many more.

Is the reintroduction of these species worth our focus? If so, why?

How do garden, park and neighborhood practices influence existing and potential future wildlife populations?

How might future wildlife populations influence/ increase garden productivity?

What garden practices might be introduced to encourage more wildlife?

Would a well managed permanent garden water feature encourage a greater diversity?

Our Neighbor, Peace and Plenty Park...

The park was created in 2008 with support from KABOOM!, the Providence Parks Department, United Way, Community Works Rhode Island and many other partners. It is the first park and playground in this northern Elmwood neighborhood.

In 2016, the park was expanded to include three adjacent vacant lots. Thanks goes out to the Providence Parks Department, Rhode Island Department Environmental Management, One Neighborhood Builders, Providence Revolving Fund, CharterCARE Health Partners, Partnership for Providence Parks, the Friends of Peace and Plenty Park, neighbors and all who helped to make this dream a reality.

You may notice that the green color used in both the park and garden are an exact match. This was purposefully done to create a feeling of visual relatedness.



Significant Garden and Neighborhood Challenges...

Our neighbor, St. Joseph's Hospital Property

The garden and this 16 + - acre heat island is owned by Paolino Properties.

Some parking lot sections of the St. Joseph's property have been divided into different Paolino Properties-held LLCs and have been designated as residential (R2 and R3). Others, including the garden, were designated for potential future commercial parking lot uses as defined in the zoning C2 category. In 2021, there was a significant community meeting with city zoning to address potential future development. Many of the C2 uses such as liquor stores, car dealerships, car repair shops and more were struck down at the meeting due to the neighbor concerns about the impacts of commercial creep into the neighborhood.

At that time, Mr. Paolino stated that the garden would remain a garden and agreed to sell the garden to Southside Community Landtrust for \$1.00. To this date, that has not happened.

The garden, along with the neighborhood's future, hangs in the balance.

Do you know? The St. Jo's property, including the acres of impervious surface parking lots and the building itself, create negative heat island impacts to the garden, the park and the immediate neighborhood.

Why is a Heat Island Problematic?

Due to absorption of the sun's rays and the resultant slow release of heat, the St. Jo's property can heat the garden, the park, and the immediate residential neighborhood by an estimated 10 degrees during the day and 5 degrees at night.

Such temperature increases have a variety of well documented consequences for the almost 50 gardeners and their families, park visitor activities and close neighbors.

The increased heat in the garden stresses crops, requires a dramatic increase in water consumption, and makes it more challenging to achieve gardening success.

This was markedly evident during the 2022 drought when most garden plots failed.

Heat islands promote higher pollution and energy usage levels, along with associated serious threats to health such as an increased risk of respiratory difficulties such as asthma, and heat cramps, heat exhaustion heat stroke and even death.

What Can You Do?

Join together with neighbors to advocate for reasonable and appropriate future uses for the St. Joseph's property. A garden, park and neighborhood friendly re-use plan is essential. Discuss this widely with your neighbors, gardeners and park visitors.

Without an active and engaged community voice, what will be our future?

To join this conversation, contact Doug at doug.crimewatch@gmail.com

Imagine Trees and Green Space Where You Are Standing...

Neighbors have been imagining the St. Joseph's parking lot becoming a cooling park-like woodland for all to enjoy. How might this address the decades of adverse impacts this property has had? Imagine how this would contribute to the future well-being of not only the garden and park, but the entire neighborhood.