

Enterprise & Initiative



Garrison Kitchen Gardens is an allotment site at Blandford military camp in Dorset, on the edge of Cranborne Chase overlooking a beautiful valley. It has taken just six months to get the project up and running, turning a football pitch into 30 productive plots.

Military camps and allotments are not the most obvious alliance, but the innovative idea to give Army families a chance to grow their own food has caught on thanks to the work of project co-ordinator Major Lynn Roddy.

Inspired by a piece on BBC's Gardener's World about allotments, Lynn set about persuading the military community that, by taking just a very small piece of land, a fantastic resource could be created. It took four months in 2008 to negotiate agreement on the land but, once the project had been given the green light, developing the site has gained incredible momentum.

"The Brigadier at Blandford Camp was very supportive of the idea and he wanted the allotments site to be highly visible," said Lynn.

And indeed, as you drive into the camp, you can see 30 plots all lined up in regimental fashion. Lynn is quick to point out that the camp has not lost the football pitch, it has just been re-sited. Happily for the allotmenters, it does mean they have inherited a very flat site.

An early challenge was to combat the notion that the transient military community at Blandford Camp – with a two-year turnaround - would not be able to sustain allotments. So far, so good - demand has far outstripped supply, with the 20 planned plots quickly increased to 30. It has quickly become obvious that people living at the camp, in housing with small garden areas, are keen to create a growing area for themselves.

The majority of the plots have been taken up by families with young children. The primary school on the camp also has its own plot and the children are actively involved in outdoor education.

"Time and time again I've heard families say they want their children to know where their food comes from," explained Lynn. "For the children it's like a big playground but they are learning at the same time. You can introduce an idea about planting seeds, they can go away and play and come back and do some watering."

At the core of the project is a small group of just four people, who – in common with most community projects – have had to give up a lot of their free time to ensure the success of the project. Squeezing in the work around their day jobs has proved tough but rewarding, according to Lynn.

Unsurprisingly, the project is run with military precision and is set up for plot holders to begin growing straight away. Each 8x10 metre plot has four raised beds filled with topsoil and council green waste, a shed and tools. In addition there are two communal compost areas, two troughs with a piped water supply and a social area with benches. The whole site is securely surrounded by rabbit-proof fencing to keep enemy invaders out.

Funding for the project has come from the military - using money set aside for local initiatives - and also from a Natural England grant as the project is in an area of outstanding natural beauty. In addition, the group have received a great deal of advice from the local allotment society.

Not wanting to stand still, Garrison Kitchen Gardens is looking into further funding to add a wormery, to

Army marches forward with pioneering site

Garrison Kitchen Gardens, Dorset



teach the children what happens to their food waste and to provide compost for the plots. They also aim to set up a community orchard. The most ambitious plan of all is to spread the idea further, providing a blueprint for the whole of the defence community in the country.

Lynn is keen to promote such an expansion: "If we can do it here and prove there is the demand, why not do it at other camps? I am really keen to take this idea around the Army and the Royal Air Force."

The Ministry of Defence has the most valuable of assets – land. Lynn, ever the optimist, has thrown down the gauntlet and it seems the challenge is already being taken up: "I am already in discussion about creating a set of guidelines which will help a base to develop its own growing area – with ideas about funding, places where you can get bulk

discounts and good sources of practical information."

The formal launch of Garrison Kitchen Gardens, which took place in June 2009, provided a further boost to Lynn's grand plan. Some top brass attended the opening ceremony along with sponsors and supporters from all over the country, to celebrate the new gardens.

The group has already done a lot of profile-raising work. The BBC Gardener's World team came to film earlier in the year and will revisit to film the first harvest.

The group also produces a newsletter which is e-mailed out far and wide to personal contacts, funders and supporters, and as Lynn says: "This will allow us to spread the message, open more doors, and provide some good publicity for the Army". ■

Eastside Roots describe themselves as a 'community gardening hub'. They are developing two inner-city sites in Bristol, in areas with high minority ethnic populations which have been deprived of investment for a long time. They aim to sustain their development through social enterprises.

It takes plenty of inspiration and enthusiasm to imagine a litter-strewn, neglected piece of land becoming a thriving green space for local people. For many people, the derelict plot next to Stapleton railway station in inner city Bristol was an eyesore and a potentially unsafe area.

But for Nick Ward, the co-ordinator of Eastside Roots, the land represented an opportunity. While studying on a permaculture course in 2005, he identified the site's potential. Discussions with the land owners Network Rail began soon after - but it was to be another two years before a lease was finally agreed.

Meanwhile Nick and a small group of others teamed up with the Trinity Centre - a nearby community centre - which had some under-used green space. The group attracted help from residents living in the surrounding flats, including many refugees and asylum seekers. Their link was through a regular volunteer who was also teaching English.

A volunteer day was organised once a week and, with good numbers turning up, the site soon grew. It now boasts raised beds, a polytunnel, a rainwater harvesting system, wormery and compost toilets. Volunteers get involved in whatever jobs need doing and take home a share of the harvest.

In December 2007, after protracted negotiations, the lease at the Stapleton Road station site was finally agreed. Eastside Roots quickly organised a consultation day and, although it was a wet January day, 140 local people turned up to listen and share their own ideas.

As a result of such a positive response, work on the site soon began, as Nick explains: "We quickly engaged the local probation service to help clear the site and by March we were ready to hold our first volunteer day. With 40 people turning up to help we managed to clear the bramble and buddleia roots and then we were ready to put down woodchip."

In planning the site, the group wanted to create a space that local people could relate to. Nick says: "We wanted to encourage local people to garden. Most only have access to a small space - often concreted over. There is a massive waiting list for allotment plots and we wanted to show people that it is possible to be productive, however small their garden is."

The result is a demonstration garden with raised beds for fruit, vegetables, salad and herbs. There is also an area of decking, a timber shelter and space for a flower garden.

So far, around a thousand people have been involved with the garden. Eastside Roots has organised two big events – a spring fair and a harvest fair – plus a seed swap and plant swap. These events have



On the right track for growing success

Eastside Roots, Bristol



proved popular, as have specific work days when as many as 20 people have turned up. However, attracting regular volunteers has proved more tricky, especially during bad summer weather.

The group have also learned about some of the sensitivities of involving the local minority ethnic community.

"We have learned that selling alcohol, although it is a big fundraiser, is a sensitive issue. So this year we are going to remove the music and drink at events and hold a separate fundraiser at the Trinity Centre. For the harvest fair we will have tea and cake sales, raffles and workshops," said Nick.

Another issue for local people is that there are not enough safe play areas for children. The group aims to develop the site so that there is space for children to play and adults to meet up - and do some gardening if they want.

In addition, Eastside Roots has introduced a roster of training courses and events at both their sites. These have included green woodworking, basic gardening skills, rainwater harvesting, wild food walks, and skills swap evenings.

Plans are certainly ambitious for the future. The garden currently opens for part of the week but, within six months, they hope to be open every day. This summer they plan to develop a play area; plant a wildflower meadow; create a medicinal herb garden; build a tool store, compost toilets and

wormery; install a solar powered water pump and turn a container into an office space!

And, as if that were not enough, the group is already looking to secure the future – through social enterprise. To date they have been lucky with European neighbourhood renewal funding and funding from the Severnside Partnership - which supports local initiatives along the railway. But plans are underway to generate income through selling produce and building school gardens.

Nick elaborates: "Over the next three years we need to consolidate our activity and become self-sufficient in terms of funding. We aim to generate income by increasing the produce we grow at the Trinity Centre site and selling the surplus at the station site."

"We have also developed an exciting partnership with another local community organisation called GroFun. We will go into a school and help build a garden, while GroFun will work on the education side."

They have already worked with their first primary school, putting in raised beds, a soft fruit bed, herb and potato tyres, fruit trees and wild flowers to attract the pollinators. They were really thrilled when the school told them "it's the best money we have ever spent!" ■

