

A decade of kai & community

Dignan St Community Garden has just turned 10. The three powerhouses behind the garden share what makes it such a success.

WORDS GRETCHEN CARROLL **PHOTOS** DIGNAN ST COMMUNITY GARDEN





LEFT One of the monthly workshops held at the Dignan St Community Garden, usually on a Sunday with wood-fired pizza.

located in the central Auckland suburb of Point Chevalier (known as Pt Chev), Dignan St Community Garden came about when Rebecca Swan saw an advertisement from the manager of the Point Chevalier Bowling Club.

“The manager, who is a passionate gardener herself, offered it to a group who wanted to transition it from a retired bowling green that hadn’t been used for 20 years into a community garden. So I went, hell yeah! We had some soil tests done, and because they hadn’t been using it for a long time, there were no nasties in the soil. That was 2015, and we’ve been regenerating it since, pumping lots of good biology into the soil, and making our own compost,” says Rebecca.

Rebecca, along with Luke Baker and Matua Rob Small (Ngāpuhi tuturu, Mahurehure), collaboratively manage the gardens. About 1000sqm in size, Dignan St Community Garden is part of Growing Point, which recently attained charitable status.

“The people are Growing Point, and Dignan St Community Garden is where our roots are, and the demonstration of our kaupapa (purpose). The three of us work for Growing Point, and the majority of the work takes place at the community garden, but it also happens online and running workshops here and there. Growing Point is kind of an education hub, which weaves in Western science and mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge) as our core principles,” says Rebecca.

The kai and the community is really building, says Rebecca. “Point Chev, as a suburb, the demographic is changing, so a lot of people live in apartments and don’t have the same sort of access to a garden that they might have once had. We see that the need for a green space in an urban environment is only going to increase in time.”

Luke says they have about 40 regular volunteers, a figure that has steadily grown over the 10 years, with another 100 that float in and out; they might come to seasonal events but they’re not showing up every week. Luke’s weekly online newsletter has more than 200 subscribers.

Matua Rob came on board in 2020, and Rebecca says he’s been an amazing addition to the team. “People come specifically for Rob if he’s got an event on, particularly the Matariki event, which about 70 people came to this year.

“We’ve seen an expansion of our volunteers, who come for all sorts of reasons. But it’s the love, the kai and the education that weave through it.”

Matua Rob brings the dimension of Māori horticulture to the team, and is a self-described kūmara nut. He has been working alongside Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei on the Kūmara Collection and Curation Project.

“We managed to collect 16 different cultivars of kūmara at Te Pourewa, which is the garden that is associated with Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei. We raised them there and multiplied them, and we’ve been doing that for a couple of years.”

He split the tuberous roots between Te Pourewa and Dignan St, and put them into trays with composted untreated sawdust. Then they go into tāpapa beds, wooden frames that house the kūmara as they produce shoots. The tūpu (cuttings) are planted into little puke (hills), which have a dedicated large area at Dignan St.

“Our hope is that we will produce even more tūpu and supply plenty back to Te Pourewa and hopefully other iwi gardens, especially across Tamaki Makaurau. But also potentially for us to make those kūmara varieties much more common, because some of them are absolutely fabulous.

“They’ve never been cultivated fully for various reasons. One would be scarcity, and the other would be that the three varieties that tend to be grown commercially are consistent in storage and easy to peel.”

Matua Rob says each variety has its own story – distinct in leaf form, skin, tuber shape, colour and taste. Together, they represent an unbroken line of care, selection and resilience stretching back over 800 years.

There are many other crops, from the well-known to the more niche. The range includes brassicas, spinach, 37 heritage varieties of fruit trees, a grove of bananas, blackberry and boysenberry vines, yacon and even hue (bottle gourd). They’re creating a food forest area that includes gooseberries, tamarillos and guava, and a small area for native plants used for rongoā Māori (traditional medicine), for example kawakawa.

“We don’t distinguish between those things that we use to heal our body on the outside, or on the inside from the food,” says Matua Rob.

Luke is filling the small greenhouse with turmeric plants, and developing a patch in front of the greenhouse with plants that have strong relationships with beneficial fungi in the soil.

“One of the practices in regenerative gardening is inoculating your seedlings and seeds to give them a great start. We’re testing a patch where we can grow crops that have strong relationships with the fungi that are there, and we can use the soil that they grow in to then inoculate the rest of the garden.”





The garden's volunteers get to take home some produce after a session, and members can harvest outside of the volunteer hours as well. When there is a surplus, they share it with the local pātaka kai (food-sharing cupboard) and the kūmara is reserved for the Matariki event.

Rebecca says this event is the highlight of their calendar. "People who don't join us for many things throughout the year will come to Matariki and bring their friends. So it grows every year. It's the beginning of the year, and it feels really relevant for us as growers."

The garden also has monthly events on a Sunday, usually tagged to a workshop, when they get the pizza oven fired up. The workshops are either delivered by the team, or a friend of the māra (garden) who has a particular topic they want to share.

For those looking to start a community garden or inject more momentum to theirs, Rebecca says a big shift came when they gained charitable status.

"Now that we're a charity, we're able to apply for a different range of funding avenues. That meant we could pay people, whereas before it was fun and experimental but there wasn't the consistency, so that's been a game changer.

"Plus, if it ain't fun, don't come. Put on things, like pizza, that really pull the community in. Even if people aren't gardeners, just having them present in the garden space lifts the energy or mauri, and they feel a sense of connection to the land."

Rebecca says while some just turn up for the social stuff, they might talk to a friend who ends up volunteering.

"We've got this dream team weaving knowledge and commitment between the three of us. People come to the gardens with problems on their shoulders. Then they get their hands in the soil, chat to some people, grow something, take some healthy kai home, and it's transformative," she says. "They leave in a better space than when they arrived, and I think that's one of the key roles that the community garden plays."

1. Matua Rob Small works closely with Ngāti Whātua Ōrākei to cultivate kūmara at Te Pourewa and Dignan St. **2.** The dream team (from left) Luke Baker, Matua Rob Small and Rebecca Swan at the Dignan St Community Garden.

3 and 4. Some of the many crops grown at the gardens: a baby hue (bottle gourd) and bananas.