



The grounds before the GROW garden got underway.



October 2023, just before the launch of the community garden.

coming together

Eleven social services agencies and support groups contribute to these vegetable beds, with many more community groups lending a hand.



Bryan the scarecrow keeps an eye on the hardworking gardeners.

No-one could ever accuse Bev Jack, Wairarapa Community Centre manager, of thinking small.

While others might want to start a small community garden to feed a few local families, Bev has created what could be called the mother of all community gardens in central Masterton.

The GROW (Gardening for Resilience and Optimal Wellbeing) community garden is part of Food Resilience Wairarapa, an ongoing project to address food poverty in the region. GROW is run by a partnership between the community centre and St Matthew's Anglican Church, which owns the land the garden occupies.

The 385-square metre site has 11 fruit and vegetable plots, each tended by a local social services agency that uses the plot to grow food for their clients and teach them gardening skills. The numerous agencies represented include two youth groups, disability support groups, The Ruth Project (providing in-home perinatal support to new parents), Wairarapa Women's Centre and a refugee support network.

Each agency is free to grow whatever it chooses in its plot. The main plots are supplemented by a shared berry garden, a medicinal garden and community plot. There is also a small orchard of espaliered fruit trees and a family of chooks that provides eggs to be sold at the garden's small shop. Community centre volunteers look after general maintenance tasks such as mulching, and provide advice and support to plot owners as needed.

The garden was launched in September 2022, after Bev managed to secure government funding during the post-Covid drive to support community resilience projects.

"When Covid hit, all of a sudden people found time to enjoy the pleasure of growing a few things in the garden," says Bev. "But then when they went back to work, the gardens failed because people didn't have the knowledge to keep them going."

Previously, the space occupied by the garden was derelict and covered in weeds. However, it was soon transformed thanks to a \$100,000 Department of Internal Affairs grant that funded a 30,000-litre water tank, greenhouse facilities and seedling storage space.

Participants in the Department of Corrections community work programme were engaged to remove fencing from around the garden to make it more welcoming, clear debris, dig trenches and prepare the garden beds.

A local builder constructed the tunnelhouse, sheds, shop, chook house and service lane.

The Masterton Fire Brigade filled the water tank as part of a training exercise.

The garden represents the third phase of the Food Resilience Wairarapa scheme, run by the Wairarapa Community Centre Trust. The first two stages saw the community centre's commercial-sized kitchen turned into a community kitchen to provide emergency meals for families in need, and cooking classes for those on a budget.

Under a partnership with the Masterton Foodbank and Waiwaste Food Rescue, leftover food is turned into about 8000 nutritious meals each year that are distributed to families in need throughout the Wairarapa and Tararua districts. The backbone of the scheme is its 100 volunteers, many of whom were previously employed in the food industry. Small teams cook once a term, using a flexible approach to menu planning that depends on what's available. "Recently the Foodbank had surplus eggs that were about to expire and Waiwaste had bacon, so we changed the menu we had planned and spent a whole afternoon making quiches," Bev recalls.

And the GROW project is now expanding into new areas. Recently, a 10-week composting trial saw 20 households near the garden provided with a bucket for their food scraps that was emptied once a week. The neighbourhood responded positively and a total of 218kg of food scraps was diverted from landfill and turned into compost for the community garden.

In another initiative, new Masterton residents were invited to a Saturday morning event at the garden to connect with other gardeners and do some light gardening work. In exchange, they were each provided with a free kitset macrocarpa raised garden bed for composting or growing veges.

Public workshops on harakeke weaving, urban chook raising, espaliered fruit trees, no dig/lasagne gardening, worm farms, herbs and bug hotels have also been held at the garden.

But despite everything that has been achieved so far, Bev sees the community garden as just "a pilot" in a much bigger dream. "The intention is that as we learn from it, other gardens just like this can be created throughout Masterton," she says. ■



MARISA KING caught the gardening bug from her parents while growing up in Ōtaki. She is now an enthusiastic home gardener and enjoys growing flowers, shrubs and veges on a quarter-acre section in Masterton.