



COMMUNITY GARDENING IN THE CITY

Will Lenton tells the tale of an urban community garden in Manchester that is both a green haven in the inner city and a place to learn practical skills.

Two years ago, when I first came across Leaf Street in Manchester, there was a small state of panic amongst the resident volunteers. People had spotted council employees wandering around the undergrowth with clipboards in their hands and disapproving looks on their faces. There were rumblings amongst the powers that be that if this 'community garden' didn't toe the line

and smarten up a bit, we'd be back to a grassy lawn for the dogs to foul on, or worse, another car park for the commuters to the offices beyond the flyover.

So straight away in this tale of Leaf Street, we have a common problem of community gardens: how do we organise ourselves and keep the volunteer energy consistent when people come and go, as they tend to do in cities?

We don't claim to have lots of answers, but two years later Leaf Street is an even more wonderful and unique garden. It's supported by the community and the council, worked on and loved by volunteers and played in by kids.

Leaf Street used to be a street between two blocks of flats until it was grassed over and blocked off when the Mancunian Way was built. In 1999, local

residents took matters into their own hands and started planting some fruit trees and making raised beds for their first pioneering vegetables. Inspired by permaculture they ran a small design course, completing a design plan and consultation for the garden. People living in the flats came and joined in, plants were donated, fruit bushes were planted and possibly Europe's largest herb spiral was built.



grants that were awarded just over a year ago by Awards for All (National Lottery), Community Chest Fund and a Manchester City Council (C:ASH) Grant. The money has also been spent on catering for community events,

what to do when they get there. It makes the garden more accessible for people who want to get involved.

One of our many mistakes along the way though was to form a limited company. Although it did help us to successfully fundraise, now that we have more experience we've realised we could have still got the grants without the extra complications and responsibilities that come with limited status. So I would definitely advise anyone considering it to research the alternatives if the group is looking for fairly small grants (i.e. less than £10,000).

As for things that we've found to work:

- More fruit trees and soft fruit. They lend themselves so well to community gardens because they are relatively low maintenance, and they're perfect for group activities like mulching, pruning and harvesting (not to mention cooking and eating! We often make a good puddin' for the weekly community People's Kitchen).

That is why Leaf Street has always been so unique. It has never been about experts telling people what to do. From the very beginning, when a couple of people went off to do permaculture courses and came back and showed others what they'd learnt, Leaf Street has been about 'having a go'. It's about learning how to plant seeds or how to weed dandelions (and we have soooo many dandelions) together. It's about playing in the willow dome with the kids when you're supposed to be digging. We beg, borrow or forage old wood from skips and cobble together raised beds, planting potatoes and sweet peas and the ever-popular nasturtiums whenever we can. And maybe our apple trees are too close together, and the brassicas always get eaten, and last Sunday we even had to dig out our blackcurrants because of a clearwing moth infestation, but people learn things and enjoy themselves. In a city that needs more green spaces, people can escape and slow down a little in the garden.

That's not to say we don't get experts in every so often. For the past two summers we have run Sunday workshops led by



organic gardeners that have been great at getting more people involved. But we always encourage people to try for themselves, to find out about nature and enjoy the garden.

These days I work as a part-time maintenance gardener helping to keep the paths and beds under control and to organise events. That wage is paid for by the

erecting notice boards at each end of the garden and bringing in workshop leaders.

But perhaps the best thing about having a paid part-time worker is that they can act as a catalyst for others to join in. Now, instead of the sporadic sessions where no one knows quite what they should be doing, we have regular gardening days each week and summer workshops. In this way people know when to come along, who has the keys for the tool shed and



- Planting specifically to encourage wildlife, especially in cities where some people are wary of eating produce grown beside a motorway, and where most green spaces are not ecologically diverse. We've spotted frogs, thrushes, comma butterflies, dragonflies and our resident hedgehog family.

- Sourcing free woodchip (for footpaths) from the council, cardboard from local music shops (think guitars and drum kits), plants from skips behind garden centres and horse manure from the police stables.

Now if we can just keep the volunteers interested and the rain at bay this autumn and winter, then we can really get a head

start on all the perennial weeds, and raise the beds even higher, and update the website, and lay the hedgerow at the north end and do something about the wasp's nest and replant the wildflower meadow and prune the trees and install some water butts and find that spade and and... 🌱

Will Lenton is currently a self-employed part-time gardener on Leaf Street Community Garden in Hulme, Manchester; and is completing an apprenticeship in musical instrument repair. Since going on the Sustainable Landuse course at Ragmans Lane Farm back in 2002, he's continued to be interested in sustainable living and communities and loves a good home-grown rhubarb crumble. Yum!

