

ABOVE PAR

Laura Tucker explores how a community garden project in Par has transformed a derelict site into a social hub.



The National Garden Scheme (NGS) is well known for its annual donations to nursing and health charities, but it also supports community gardening projects under the Community Gardens Award Scheme and has dramatically increased its funding in this area.

“The pandemic highlighted the critical importance of access to green spaces for everyone’s health and wellbeing,” said NGS chief executive George Plumtre. “It’s easy to see why more and more people are creating or joining community gardens; these projects involve people from the whole spectrum of society, often giving crucial individual benefits while also having a substantial impact at a local level.”

Until recently, Jubilee Corner in Par was a derelict piece of land next to the highly successful Par Bay Community Garden. It had been an overgrown eyesore and hazard for many years, with two old fire engines left to decay on the site of an old house.

Work on the main garden had begun in 2015, with the aim of improving an unused parcel of land for the benefit of all. The site has been transformed gradually over the years: raised beds of different heights, accessible by wheelchair, have been built and planted with flowers and vegetables, grown from seed by local individuals and groups.

The garden is open daily for people to come and go as they choose, to tend the

beds or harvest the produce, or simply just to sit and enjoy the green space. A popular ‘swap and share’ arrangement allows anyone to take or donate spare seedlings, plants and excess produce.

The Community Garden has quickly become a central hub where people meet, socialise and enjoy the whole shared process of sowing, nurturing and harvesting. Primary schoolchildren get up close and personal with the plants, pushing their fingers in the soil and picking a few flowers to take home. Local groups meet or stop off here, while individuals without their own garden read the newspaper in the shade of the apple tree.

Friends bring a picnic and teenagers just hang out, sometimes over a pizza. During lockdown, musicians practised and T’ai Chi sessions took place in the open-sided covered area. In the summer holidays, home-grown talent ran art and craft sessions, while local churches organised Songs of Praise events.

Sonia Clyne, who had the initial vision for the project, says: “It’s wonderful to see the transformative effects the garden has on people, relieving anxiety, building confidence and self-esteem, and bringing such joy.”

Along with John Elkington, Sonia has enthusiastically taken up the challenge of the Jubilee Corner extension. The site has been cleared and work has begun to incorporate it into the Community Garden. “Lots of local residents have shown a great deal of interest in the initiative to reclaim the

site,” John explains. “People have come forward with so many stories and photos from years ago that we are working out how best to preserve and present the history.”

“We are very grateful for donations of benches to sit on, troughs to plant in and paving slabs,” adds Sonia. Eden Project staff visited to identify existing plants and offer advice on what to plant in the challenging conditions.

Earlier this year, the NGS gave Jubilee Corner an award under the Community Gardens Award Scheme. The prize money will be used to secure the site with fencing and to do the jobs volunteers can’t do themselves. Next year, Sonia and John would like to sow a mix of wildflower seeds and plant espalier fruit trees along the border. They anticipate that Jubilee Corner will become a space for open-air events to be enjoyed by the whole community.

Applications for the 2023 Community Garden Awards are invited from October 17 until midnight on January 31. NGS ambassador Danny Clarke says: “We want to see this funding going to the heart of community projects, helping to invigorate the people they support and introduce new audiences to the huge benefits that gardens and gardening bring to their health, wellbeing and to the surrounding environment.” ●

To apply, visit <https://ngs.org.uk/who-we-are/community-gardens-award/>

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