

Learning, Growing, Recovering

By Matthew Kemshaw for VIPIRG's Urban Agriculture Working Group

Formed as the "Urban Agriculture Working Group" under the nebulous umbrella of the Vancouver Island Public Interest Research Group (VIPIRG), a collection of committed community volunteers has banded together to create a growing movement. Our goal? The creation of therapeutic food gardens in Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) facilities.

Led forward by the vision of farmer, nurse and friend Celina Carter, we decided to advocate for the creation of two raised garden beds in the courtyard of Victoria's Withdrawal Management Center. Promising free labor and donated materials, we received approval from VIHA and began construction on two 4"x10" raised beds this winter. We installed the beds in early spring, filled them with soil and have now begun a weekly gardening program for clients at the facility. As the veggies grow, we too are continuing to develop.

Aided by committed support from the LifeCycles Project Society, we have been able to expand our efforts and are now growing food in 3 more of VIHA's Mental Health and Addictions Facilities. As a strong community leader in urban agriculture, the LifeCycles Project Society has been a big advocate for our project since its early stages, offering plants, soil amendments, and administrative support to help grow this exciting initiative.

Through the spring and summer we have witnessed the creation of several inspiring connections formed between our clients and their gardens. Our goal has always been to create these gardens as therapeutic, healing spaces – seeing this vision realized has touched all of us involved deeply. Though we are encouraged by what seems like an increasingly wide base of support within VIHA (especially the Mental Health and Addictions wing of that nebulous organization), much remains to be done if this initiative is to become a truly sustainable and long lasting venture. Support for coordinating the development of these gardens and ensuring their seasonal maintenance is critical. Assistance firmly establishing and delivering a meaningful horticultural therapy program in these gardens is even more vital. Sadly, money talks.

That said, the dedication and commitment shown by a small group of 8 or so volunteers is staggering. Their passion for this project is echoed loudly in all that we have accomplished. To all those who have supported our initiative thus far, we wish to extend the most gracious and sincere thank you!

If you wish to offer support for this important community project (volunteer or otherwise) please contact Matthew – 250.661.3805.