

## Edinburgh College Student Engagement Edinburgh College Community Gardens and Orchards



### About the project

#### Summary

Edinburgh College (EC) has built up two thriving community gardens: Milton Road Community Garden (MRCG) on the East; and Sighthill Community Garden (SCG) on the West. The College is also in the process of developing four community orchards. Starting in 2012 as part of a student-led project, the community gardens have developed into an important college and community resource. The gardens are an important part of our curricular delivery and are used by a wide range of student groups. For many of these users the gardens represent much more than a space to grow food. They are a space to learn about healthy living, gain new skills, and build self-confidence and self-esteem as well as increasing employability, adopting sustainable behaviours and, not underestimating the importance of making new friends.

#### Project partners

We have over 200 participants from a diverse range of groups including students, staff and local community members and groups.

At MRCG alone in the academic year 2012-13 around **140** individuals took part. In the year 2013-14 there were **150** and in 2014-15 this number has grown to well over **200**, with many more people enjoying the garden as a place to relax and watch the world go by. Around **80** individuals have volunteered at SCG since March 2014. At both gardens, participants are at the core of the planning and development of the gardens. They are involved in decision making and collectively work together to build and maintain the community gardens.

### The results

#### The problem

In 2012, one of the legacy Students' Association Ethics and Environment Student Officers put forward the idea of building a community garden for students, staff and community members using a vacant space at one of our campuses (Milton Road). The main reasons for doing this were to:

- Give easier access to fresh vegetables encouraging students/staff/community to develop a healthier lifestyle.
- Enable students and staff to engage in an outdoor activity which benefits their health and wellbeing.
- Encourage dialogue around sustainable consumption as well as encouraging participants, as consumers, to make food choices which support their local producers.

#### Profile

Example:

- FEI
- 22,565 students (includes full and part time students)
- 1,439 staff
- Urban

Category supported by



# Finalist's case study

## The approach

The structural elements of the new space were agreed through focus groups involving students, staff and community members. At this stage, it became clear that while the commitment was there, the ability to maintain such a project and ensure its longevity was uncertain. Senior Management approved a proposal to hire a community garden coordinator.

The benefits of MRCG were recognised at the College Development Network Annual Awards when it was awarded the Health and Wellbeing Category in November 2013.

Following the success of MRCG the College decided to open a new community garden at our Sighthill Campus in 2013-14. After several months of consultation work began in March 2014. Since the development of the Sighthill Community Garden (SCG), it is going from strength to strength. Despite capacity issues, the number of courses and volunteers involved at SCG is increasing.

In 2015 we developed our "Community Growing and Biodiversity Strategy" which aims to provide a framework for our activities as well as exploring where we can explore other ideas.

## Our goals

- increase self-esteem and build confidence
- improve employability skills
- encourage participants to learn new skills
- improve social understanding and integration
- promote a healthier lifestyle and a better well-being
- provide opportunities to grow your own
- improve environmental awareness and promote sustainability
- build a sense of community
- improve and enhance biodiversity

## Obstacles and solutions

The consultation process shew concern about vandalism	Inclusiveness was chosen as the best prevention to vandalism. The gardens are inclusive to everyone. They are open 24/7, the fence is low and see-through, the gate has no lock, the shed is locked with padlock but has plastic windows to allow anyone to see inside, and the polytunnel is accessible 24/7 with no lock. If the space was secluded some individuals might feel excluded and it would increase the garden being targeted for vandalism acts.
Fear about participants not coming during summer time	While the number of volunteers drops during summer participants still come. Students welcome the possibility to be active in the garden during summer and to socialise in a safe environment. Community groups welcome the continuity of access to the garden for their users use over the summer time.
Recruiting new volunteers	We advertise the project at Fresher events, networking events with local organisations, by putting posters up, organizing open days as part of city wide open days' event, and maintaining and increasing contact via social media.

Funding	Our first principle is to avoid buying stuff. We reuse a wide variety of materials including pallets, tyres, bottles, pots and much more. These are then upcycled into items which we can use in the gardens such as benches, planters, pots and tables. The College pays for the staff costs and some of the materials we do need. For the rest we apply for external funding for specific projects, and we ask for in-kind donation.
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## Performance and results

Participants become more aware of environmental issues surrounding food production and feel encouraged to develop a more sustainable approach to their own habits, reflecting on the link between the economy, society and the environment.

Participants follow the development of plants from seeds to vegetables, which encourages them to become more adventurous in their choice of food. Furthermore, following students' requests the project is currently planning the development of a cooking area to gain new cooking skills and to learn about social sharing of food.

Participants also increase their self-esteem and confidence. The gardens provide good outdoor spaces to pursue physical activities as well as providing a place to relax. Participants are consistently reporting positive impacts on their physical health such as better flexibility, sleep pattern and mental health. They develop a better body awareness and have a better view about themselves and their body image.

The outdoor workshops provide a setting which encourages people to open up. The Community Garden Coordinator has completed a COSCA course to enable her to use appropriate listening skills and give appropriate responses when individuals reveal sensitive information. The outdoor environment is also helping staff members go through emotional ups and downs or loss; they report that coming to the garden helps them to deal with the changes happening in their lives.

Students with additional needs increase their confidence in their own abilities and what they can achieve. In 2015 the MRCG started to offer the Caley Grow & Learn Award which recognises the achievement of people with complex additional needs who volunteer in garden settings.

Unexpected informal conversations about where our food comes from, our food and drink consumption habits, peer pressure regarding alcohol consumption as well as nutrition and the relation between food, health and wellbeing often present themselves in the community gardens. These conversations are initiated by the participants due to the informal setting and enable them and the other members to reflect on their own experiences and behaviours. Conversations are not limited to food and drink - topics such as peer pressure, friendship, relationships, social media, gang culture, violence and abusive behaviour are not unheard of in the gardens.

Students and community members volunteer in the garden during the summer time when there are no courses. Students see the garden as a good way to keep busy and they are always met with a welcoming environment.

Since the start of the garden several students have moved on to study Rural Skills courses after volunteering in the garden. Indeed, some of them are now in employment in this sector.

## The future

### Lessons learned

The consultation process is invaluable to the success of the project and so is communication around the evolution of the scheme. Volunteers are at the core of the project and encouraging their active participation is an invaluable part of the success. This active participation in decision making and the having the possibility of making ideas/projects happen within the gardens scheme development are the building stones of trust and confidence between all stakeholders.

### Sharing your project

We communicate in various ways with our audience. Face to face communication seems to be the best way to recruit volunteers and get in contact with community groups. Whatever events we are invited to (network or stall at Freshers) we always have our flyers ready. We have pull up banners for each of the garden project. We communicate a lot via Facebook, Twitter and intranet sites. We also make sure that local media mention us on regular basis. In winter time we network a lot and we also go to events as attendees to network, gain new experiences and share our own.

### What has it meant to your institution to be a Green Gown Award finalist?

For the volunteers of the gardens project being finalist means a lot as it puts an external recognition to their achievement and participation. Being finalist for a UK wide award is always something special. For Edinburgh College it is recognition for the growth and development of their unique project and for work that many people have put in

### Further information

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Facebook:

- <https://www.facebook.com/MiltonRoadCommunityGarden> or
- <https://www.facebook.com/SighthillCommunityGarden?>

Twitter:

- <https://twitter.com/ECCCommunityGrow>