



Garden Community

Garden Helps to Grow a Community

By Karen Wilson

The residents of River Garden Estates are raising more than a garden in the city's Niños Parkway. They are promoting mutual respect among diverse cultures.

Andrea Porras, a community organizer for the Sacramento Mutual Housing Association for the past year, had her work cut out for her when she came to the 124-unit South Natomas apartment complex.

The garden is "20-to-30 years old depending on who's telling the story," Porras says. Problems had developed over the years as nonresidents used the garden plots as dumping grounds for trash and chemicals. Code enforcement inspectors noted health and safety hazards and required the cleanup and removal of some of the garden structures such as homemade greenhouses.

A memorandum of understanding between the city and SMHA allows the gardens to continue on city land, with SMHA providing water. "SMHA wants the community to govern the garden," Porras says, and that's where she came in. Porras' job was to work with residents to bring the garden into compliance with health and safety codes and expand the gardening community itself. "The garden had been mostly run by the Russian community," Porras says, "and there was tension about reorganizing the garden, shrinking the size of spaces, and cleaning them up."

Plots are 500-square-feet per family plus a little more per child. Each family has put up a number on the family plot. Claudia Iturriazaga is a native of Peru. "The garden is a complex but beautiful



Natalia Durkot's (left) crops include lima beans, cabbage and raspberries. Claudia Iturriazaga (right) likes gardening with her husband and son, and will grow Peruvian chiles next year.

site," she says, noting the politics and the physical labor as well as the satisfactions of gardening. "Vegetables are fresher if you grow them yourself," she says. "Gardening is a time to relax with the family. I like it. I will experiment with growing chiles from my country. You can't buy them in stores here."

Xong Vang and her daughter Nancy, members of the Hmong community, are also newcomers to the garden, "I have lots of kids," Xong says, "and I want them to have fresh vegetables. I don't like the chemicals used on the produce you get at the stores." She is growing cucumbers, peppers and watermelon this year and plans to put Hmong and Chinese vegetables next year.

Natalia Durkot says, "Most community members have low incomes and are looking to help themselves. When I moved here I heard about the garden. I enjoy it because when you have your own

it's fresh and healthy. It's ours." Durkot has been gardening here for six years, and shares cucumbers, tomatoes, beets, grapes, peaches and raspberries with her large family.

Porras says it was hard for the established gardeners to accept new rules and trust the new families who have come to the garden. "All our meetings are in three or four languages," she says, Noting President Obama's background as a community organizer, Porras says that on his inauguration day, "I finally connected in a respectful way with our Russian translator. I wasn't taking no for an answer on that day!"

As for the gardeners, Durkot says she is interested in seeing those Peruvian vegetables, while Iturriazaga marvels at her neighbor's raspberries. "I had never seen them growing before I saw them in Natalia's garden."



Sacramento Mutual Housing Association develops housing that is affordable to a diversity of households. Our housing builds strong and stable communities through resident participation and leadership development.

For more information, call (916) 453-8400 or visit our website at mutualhousing.com.