

# Growing together

All across the UK, from cities to the countryside, people are coming together to grow food in community gardens. **Caroline Roberts** met the members of one urban garden

Overlooked by the high-rise blocks of an east London housing estate sits a little green haven. Cranbrook Community Food Garden in Bethnal Green was established in 2009 by local residents who transformed a disused and vandalised children's playground into a growing space that's abuzz with human activity and wildlife.

For local residents like Sally Brading, who lives nearby in a top-floor flat, the garden is a valued outside space. 'It's a place to connect to the earth and to grow healthy food for my family,' she says. 'There's also a real sense of community, and people are there for each other.'

The garden has an array of raised beds growing all manner of produce, such as kale, exotic gourds, aromatic herbs and red mountain spinach. There are rhubarb and pumpkin patches, compost bays, wormeries and a pergola with a green roof. In summer the abundance of green tomatoes is turned into chutney for sale at Christmas markets, and there's 'berry lane' – a row of native fruit bushes planted alongside the path that runs next to the garden so passers-by can pick the fruit.

It's free for anyone to take part, and the garden now has more than 50 members who



Sally Brading values the sense of community



Sally tends to plants in the greenhouse

are involved to varying degrees in the group gardening sessions on Saturdays and Wednesday evenings. 'We all work together and at the end of the day we harvest what needs to be eaten and share it out to take home, although often the raspberries and blackcurrants don't make it that far,' laughs Sally.

Members also propagate and sell plants to raise funds, and surplus produce is given to places that make food for people who need it. With a frog pond, bird spa and pollinator-friendly plants, the garden

provides an important space for wildlife too, and has won a borough-wide Best Garden for Wildlife award as well as numerous London in Bloom accolades.

One of the things that makes the Cranbrook garden exciting, says Sally, is the cultural diversity of the area, which has a particularly large Bengali population as well as residents from many other parts of the world. 'You're always learning from other people. There's someone from every continent involved in the garden and they bring

Jiri Hera/Shutterstock; Andrew Kipps

their own knowledge, traditions, and growing techniques as well as food to share.'

Now members are drawing on that diversity to create their own cookbook containing quick and simple ways to cook produce that people might not be familiar with. With funding from the Tower Hamlets Council Small Grants Fund, they set up community cooking sessions where members could share their favourite recipes, cook and eat together, and capture the recipes. They

have now gathered around 90 recipes for the book, which will be printed in English and Bengali to reflect the local demographic.

The garden is also a place for local children to come and learn about nature and growing, and Sally has been bringing her son to sessions since he was a baby. 'I grew up in the countryside and I wanted to pass on the enjoyment I got from popping the pods and eating the fresh peas, and planting beans and seeing how big they got. He loved being



Gerry Matthews enjoys bringing her skills to the garden

Nicola Ferrari

able to root around and get muddy, and he'd often get taken under someone's wing and learn about all sorts of things. He made a stool out of some old bits of wood and helped a member plumb in our garden kitchen sink.'

As well as the obvious physical benefits, community gardens can support mental health too. Working alongside others helps people to open up about things that are bothering them, says Sally. 'It's a real listening space. People come to the garden when they're not feeling great, and they know they'll be listened to.'

Retiree Gerry Matthews, agrees. 'If I'm feeling stressed, getting out of the front door can be really problematic for me, but the brisk walk to the garden and knowing people are going to be there makes all the difference. If you're living in a flat by yourself, it's an outdoor space where you can go, interact with people of all ages and make a contribution.'

There's something everyone can do, regardless of their physical capabilities, she adds, from carrying cans for watering and tidying away the tools to categorising plants and writing labels. She gets particular satisfaction from putting her previous gardening experience and the knowledge she's gained from years of working on community projects to good use. 'Everyone brings something different to the garden and it reminds you that you have knowledge that's of value.'

## LENTIL AND RHUBARB SOUP

The tart rhubarb adds an extra piquancy to this wholesome soup, contributed by garden member Jaimini.

**Serves 4**

### INGREDIENTS

- 180g dried red lentils
- 2 tsp olive oil
- 340g carrots, finely chopped
- 300g celery, finely chopped
- 250g onion, finely chopped
- 2 tbsp fresh parsley, chopped
- 340g rhubarb, chopped
- 1 litre vegetable stock
- ½ tsp salt
- 1 bay leaf (optional)
- ¼ tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tsp fresh dill, chopped, plus extra sprigs for garnish
- 6 tsp crème fraîche, crumbled fresh goat's cheese or vegan alternative

### METHOD

1. Rinse the lentils in a sieve. Place in a bowl, cover with boiling water and soak for 10 minutes.
2. Heat the olive oil in a large pot over a medium-high heat. Add the carrots, celery, onion and parsley. Sauté for 4 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add rhubarb and sauté for 3 more minutes.
3. Drain the lentils and add to the pot. Stir in the vegetable stock and salt. Add a bay leaf if desired. Bring to a simmer, reduce the heat, cover and simmer for 35 minutes, or until the lentils are tender.



4. Optional blending: remove about 2 cups of the lentil mixture from the pot. Blend in a blender until smooth. Return the blended mixture to the pot and stir to combine.
5. Stir in the black pepper.
6. To serve, ladle into bowls. Mix the chopped dill and crème fraîche or crumbled cheese in a bowl and place a spoonful on top of each serving. Garnish with dill sprigs.

*The Cranbrook Community Cookbook* is due to be published this spring. Keep an eye on the website ([www.cranbrook.garden](http://www.cranbrook.garden)) or email [CranbrookCCFG@gmail.com](mailto:CranbrookCCFG@gmail.com) for updates.