

Garden guardians

Barracks Lane Community Garden is created by a local group of volunteers so that it can be enjoyed by the entire city of Oxford

Oxford is known as the city of dreaming spires and Barracks Lane Community Garden is within a mile of Magdalen Tower, where choristers have welcomed May Morning for over 600 years.

But eight years ago the garden was part of an Oxford that the cameras and tourists rarely see – a toxic and neglected wasteland in the centre of a residential community, old workshops and garages, owned by the city council, fallen into disrepair, used only by truanting school children and drug dealers by day, and prostitutes by night.

Local residents created the momentum to reclaim the space for the community. The council agreed to a 'peppercorn rent' and a huge fundraising effort, drawing on national and local grants and private giving, enabled the space to be reclaimed and for a basic garden to be in place by 2007.

A system of community 'Garden Guardians' ensures that the garden is open on weekends from March to October, so that everybody can enjoy the space. On a warm day, 'The Beach' (the garden's giant sandpit) is crowded with young children; friends and families picnic on the lawn; on a cold day, the wood-burning stove comes in handy.

With the help of the Big Lottery Fund's Local Food grant, regular food-related events are held: seed swaps, plant swaps, sow and grow workshops, fruit-tree pruning, bee-keeping, chicken-keeping, foraging, apple pressing and cooking events. They have Tandoori and Cob Ovens in the garden, built by workshop groups.

The garden is used to demonstrate environmentally-friendly principles, with

a grant from Trust for Oxfordshire Environment, and a huge amount of volunteer labour, there's a shelter with a green roof, solar panels and a clay-puddled wildlife pond. The maintenance of the garden is entirely in the hands of volunteer groups, which include students from both local universities as well as more permanent residents.

The garden is also supported by the Parasol Group – a group of able and disabled teenagers who learn about cooking and growing food in the garden, and have their own dedicated vegetable area within the garden. Even in these straitened times, a generous grant from Oxfordshire County Councils Aiming

High Project has seen a yurt replaced with a wooden cabin, and a composting toilet has been built.

"It's wonderful to help and support so many varied groups and projects," said Kate Jury, who is a trustee of the garden. "But what makes our garden really special is the way it's always in use by the immediate community. So many different groups – Natural Parenting, Forest Schools for Local Primary Schools, playgroups, cooking and sewing circles, meditation, permaculture, drumming circles – fill our calendar every day of the week, winter, spring, summer and autumn. And throughout the year the garden is also used for weddings, birthday parties, celebrations and memorials. It's truly a place where the community is happy to be."

With thanks to: Big Lottery Awards for All and Breathing Spaces; Links Allotment Association; Big Lottery Fund's Local Food scheme; Oxford City Council; Oxford Preservation Trust; Oxfordshire

Questions for Kate



How did you get involved in the project?

My friend Annie is a trustee of the garden and she asked me to get involved back in 2007. I was retraining as a landscape designer at the time so it was good timing with the new skills I was acquiring.

What is your role in the project?

I am a trustee and for the first three of four years I was treasurer but this is now being done by somebody else so this year I can get more involved horticulturally!

What advice would you give to others looking at doing similar projects?

Really believe in it! To do a project the way we have done it – with it being entirely run by volunteers – the only way that things will happen is if you believe in what you are doing. You have to pass on enthusiasm to others.

County Council; The Midcounties Co-operative; Trust for Oxfordshire's Environment (TOE); Waste Recycling Environmental Limited; Oxfordshire Stronger Communities Fund.

Visit the garden

Barracks Lane Community Garden, Barracks Lane, off Cumberland Road, Oxford OX4 2AP; www.barrackslanegarden.org.uk

Open to the public every weekend, 11am to 5pm, March to October. Check the website for details. Open for booking all year round.

'Garden Guardians' volunteer for one of four weekend shifts each week, and can do as little as one shift a year or as many as they wish

Factfile

- The garden is 768 sq m (840 sq yd), with a log cabin, two shelters, grassy area, community orchard, raised beds, and composting toilet!
- The garden is entirely run by a committee of volunteer trustees.
- Start date: 2004
- Number of visits: over 4,000 in 2011
- Number of friends: over 1,000 people are signed up to the garden's mailing list

Win a great prize for your community project

This month Barracks Lane Community Garden will receive a bumper gardening pack, worth over £350 from Thompson & Morgan, full of flower and veg seeds, hanging baskets, fertiliser and plants.

Next month it could be you! If you're a member of a local community or school gardening project, post or email a synopsis of your achievements, with some before and after pictures to Garden answers, Media House, Lynch Wood, Peterborough, PE2 6EA or email getinvolved.gardenanswers@bauermedia.co.uk. For more info on Thompson & Morgan's range, visit www.thompson-morgan.com



Clockwise from above: The tasty results of an apple pressing workshop; Digging the wildlife pond; Enjoying the garden in summer; Apple pressing fun day at Barracks Lane; Laying the foundations of the clay-puddled wildlife pond; Working on the green roof

