

Meet the team



An interview with Julia Czernik, one of our hard working volunteers and the new addition to the team.



This month we would like to introduce Julia, who joined Communigrow as a volunteer in July 2020. Having been made redundant from a demanding Events and Conferences job in central London due to the coronavirus pandemic, she was keen to develop her interest in gardening and horticulture through charity volunteering. Have you been enjoying our newsletters? Well, Julia is the person behind the scenes - she designs the newsletters, and makes it possible for you to receive what you are reading now. She is also our top fan on Instagram. Her passion for learning about growing food and commitment to our cause, got her involved in growing activities, so she is also a familiar and friendly face to those who attend practical sessions at the field. As of this week, Julia is our new Development Officer at Communigrow, responsible for collaborative partnerships with other organisations, the management of all day to day activities across the teams and the development of the charity, allowing further growth.

What inspired you to join Communigrow?

It's a long story! I'd been working in an office in London, doing crazy hours and facing a huge amount of stress, and I really wanted a change. A former colleague had been very keen on keeping an allotment and he was always telling me how rewarding it was to take an organic approach to growing. Unfortunately, we only had a small place to live but I wanted to explore the idea of being an outdoor gardener, and so when Covid happened and I was made redundant that prompted me to have a think about what I could do.

I registered with a brilliant website called 'Furlunteer' and was given a few options. I came across Communigrow, and it really clicked - I was immediately like 'I love it', it fitted so well with what I had been researching and reading about. I was really excited, so I got in touch with Maria and she asked if I would like to come to the field, and that's how I started.

Initially I started helping with the social media and the newsletter, because that was my professional experience, but after a while I moved across to helping at the Communigrow field itself. I'm really enjoying my time there: the volunteers I've met are amazing, and everything has turned out really well.

So out of the challenges of Covid, being made redundant, and being in quite a difficult situation, you've been able to find Communigrow. And that's something which obviously you've found really enjoyable?

Yes definitely. People say everything happens for a reason, right? My lifestyle now is very different to what it used to be.

I remember the first time I visited the Communigrow field, I met Clair, and she gave me a tour and I loved it immediately. Then I was sent to work on something - I can't remember what it was - but I went with the mindset of a busy London office, 'oh I have to do this really quickly because soon I'll have another thing I need to do', and I think I did it in about half an hour!

"Things are more peaceful, and you feel this sense of calmness, but at the end of the day you get a huge sense of achievement"



It took me a few weeks to sort of pull back and appreciate the time and the moment while at the Communigrow field, it was a pretty interesting change from my hectic working day before. Things are more peaceful, and you feel this sense of calmness, but at the end of the day you get a huge sense of achievement because you can see that you have weeded an entire section or planted a load of leeks... and it's quieter, but you're also happier.

It certainly sounds like you've experienced quite a big change?

Yes, for me it was a massive change but a good one. I've always wanted to know where things come from, such as where our vegetables are being grown, and being involved in growing things locally is really rewarding. I've worked in the charity sector before, but as part of a large international organisation. Although the work was important, it didn't feel quite the same - at Communigrow you can actually see the impact of your work close up, you can meet the people attending the sessions and when they come and collect their vegetable boxes, it's all just a lot closer to home.

Did you have any experience of gardening and horticulture before you started?

Not really. My earliest memory is growing up in a house where my grandparents and parents lived together, and I remember my grandfather had a vegetable patch with runner beans, tomatoes, cucumbers as well as raspberries and strawberries for me and my brother. My grandfather would grow these tomatoes in a makeshift greenhouse and I still remember their flavour each summer. That's the earliest memory of any vegetable growing but I'd never tried myself.

Then in March last year my partner and I got an allotment, and although we didn't really know what we were doing we received a huge amount of support from the growing community and it was a really great experience. By the time I started at Communigrow I was so full of questions and wanting to talk to people, and it was so exciting being able to talk to people about composting, and adding worms to the soil, and just entering this entirely new world.



"Meeting like-minded people has been one of the biggest perks, definitely."

Meeting like-minded people has been one of the biggest perks, definitely. Everyone at Communigrow is very friendly and we all share the same goals, and it's really helpful to share hints and tips about how to improve your gardening and everyone is very open and generous. People are always offering their seeds, or they may be growing too much of certain things, so you can pick up seedlings to take home and that's really great too. Last year I had germinated a load of tomatoes, so I brought them in for people to take, and they offered me broccoli plants in exchange, so little things like that are fantastic because it doesn't feel like anything goes to waste. There's a really strong sense of helping and sharing.

Are there any specific projects you've worked on which you've particularly involved or are looking forward to being involved with?

I'd really like to get more involved with the team and continue to share my passion and what I've learned. This is a really good time for Communigrow, as people are taking a step back and looking at where their food is coming from, especially now Brexit has happened, and food imports may be getting more difficult. I think people are seeing the value of giving back to their community and supporting local businesses.

What would you say to someone looking to volunteer for Communigrow?

I would say go for it. And that goes for any kind of volunteering. We all have busy lives and jobs, but not many people call their job their hobby, so volunteering can become an extra space where you can do what you actually want and what you enjoy, and even give something back. Obviously, work is important too but with volunteering you get the opportunity to pursue what you enjoy specifically because it's your spare time, and you can really make a difference especially in smaller charities. Under each lockdown it's been great to be able to visit Communigrow; because it's a big field you can go and be easily socially distanced but still spend time with other people without putting anyone at risk. I've really valued that.

Interview by Euan Philipps.