

Meet the team

AN INTERVIEW WITH HEATHER CORNALLY, COMMUNITY GARDENER AT COMMUNIGROW.



Heather joined Communigrow as Community Gardener in June 2022. Prior to this role she was volunteer and then 'bank staff' with the education team and then on the horticultural side.

She is now the main person working with volunteers at the field on a daily basis. With great knowledge in education and a can-do attitude, Heather plays an important role in Communigrow's Team.

Sui: What is your role here at Communigrow?

Heather: My job title is Community Gardener. My main role is to organise the volunteers at the field and to help people to learn to grow. We have some very experienced growers but not everyone is, so it's wonderful to have a mixture. I'm looking forward to when there is more time for people to share their knowledge and to do a bit of teaching. At the moment it's all very busy so that's something for the future. I'll also be contributing to events.

Prior to this role I was a volunteer and then "bank staff" with the education team then on the horticultural side. Then since the 1st June I've been the Community Gardener.

The first time I came to the site I was volunteering and helping out at events doing bug hunts, because I have a background in wildlife education.

So your background was in education first?

Yes, I've done all sorts of things. I've worked in offices for years, travelled the world a bit and then became a teacher and then I worked for the RSPB and after that, I worked in an environmental centre for schools and we would teach them about all sorts of things. There were other subjects on the programme but my favourites were on the nature side. In terms of wildlife education, I've been doing that for 17-20 years? I don't know - a long time!

It's nice and varied but everything ties up with what Communigrow does here!

This role blends together everything that I've been doing in my career, even in terms of having lovely groups of people to work with, so it's as if I'm meant to be here. This position has tied in a lot of threads so I was absolutely delighted when I ended up here!

Do you also have growing or gardening in your background?

I've got the RHS qualification. I did the first year at Hadlow and I had the most amazing mentor, who ditched the textbooks and told us what we needed to know and also the fun stuff. He was the most inspirational person. I had been learning a lot about animals and I had done a lot of research on plants for myself for my own interest, and then I thought, well why don't I go and get a qualification?

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And did you have a gardening role before you came to Communigrow?

No, not gardening in itself. Where I worked there was a big garden, but our focus was definitely the wildlife. So obviously I'm very keen to do anything to enhance the wildlife here. Aren't we all, where we can? So, I think that blends really nicely.

Mmm, yes, I think a place like Communigrow attracts those who want to garden with wildlife and community in mind.

I've never...no, except for one year twenty years ago, I used chemicals in my garden and then I didn't. It just felt so wrong, I couldn't do it anymore. So, I haven't used them since and I've developed my garden into a wildlife sanctuary. I really disagree with the monoculture of lawns. It doesn't do anything for anyone, so I keep digging up the lawn. I absolutely love it towards the end of the summer when I pull up in my car and the headlights go across my wildlife bed and it's full of moths. I now have two species of grasshopper in the garden and I'm in an urban area. And I've also created a sparrow alley - with birds it's about where they can nest. The garden to me is for wildlife.

Given your passion for wildlife, what is it that drew you to Communigrow, rather than finding a wildlife garden specifically, say, to work/volunteer in?

I want to learn more. Here it's about the food. When I was teaching, I taught in schools in deprived areas. When I think they used to fight over a plate of sausages... But if they could even have grown some of their own food they would have had enough to eat. And that's the point - it's helping to get the knowledge out there to empower people to empower others, in order to do something simple that all our grandparents did, all our parents did (in my upbringing). To grow and to reach people who might not be used to growing veg anymore. And it's the same, as I see everything concreted over. How many gardens up my street are growing vegetables? I can't think of any out of my neighbours who are actually growing veg. And you don't want it to be a lost skill. It's completely vital and of course you want them to be growing things without the use of chemicals. To me it's a bit like the pharmaceutical companies saying "oh you need this because I've designed a tablet, so this is the one you need", whereas there might be alternatives that will help which are not chemical based. It's trying to eradicate a mindset to get it back to how it used to be because actually that worked.



"I want to create a pleasant, fun and sociable place but not somewhere where people feel pressurised to do or learn certain things."

Growing is back to basics and back to the elements of what is actually making things function. So, it's very important. And the more people you can teach to grow properly, the more people can share their knowledge and be enthusiastic elsewhere. And on top of that it's the nutrition of the food we're eating. It's lessened in supermarkets so we want to go back to nutritious food with the right vitamins and goodness that is not currently in the supermarkets. When you put it all together it's a very scary, slippery slope unless we help to bring it back up and to re-educate people really. So, the growing side, the veg side, is supremely important.

Yeah, that's similar to me, that's what drew me here to Communigrow too. I've been gardening for a long time but I don't know much about food growing and I feel, too, that from a community and social and food justice perspective it is something that is so important. There is so much sovereignty and independence in being able to grow food. And I would say, for me, with Communigrow, I see value in encouraging people to come here to grow with us because growing in community is so different. Growing in isolation when you're struggling to pay bills, to put food on the table... it's a privilege to think that growing food is easy because it's not - it requires land, a lot of energy, a lot of skill, there's a lot of heartache, disappointment and even failure. Growing by yourself in isolation is not necessarily easy. So actually what I find most important and what drew me here is the community aspect - growing together in community so that we can support each other. To me, what would be great is if families came here to grow with us when/if they can or to get some produce from here.

Yes, completely. I know we are developing as we go along and we are looking at more projects we can do in the future, just to get the word out there and bring more people in. Which is why we have our open days.

It's about never taking anything for granted. Even food.

Yes, and we so often do take food for granted so easily because it's so readily available to many of us and it can be so cheap, we've forgotten how to value it.

Yes, a lot of the time it's the non-nutritious food which is cheap. There was an item on the radio the other day that said, of course they only add sugar into foods because it's so processed that it would taste disgusting without it. So, it's about proper food. Grown with love [laughs]!

Yes! That is what food growing is to me. It's an expression of love and what you get from it in return is love and care back. So you put love into growing and you receive love back in the form of food.

Yes, that's the cycle of life that we seem to be so separated from now.



So, how did you come across Communigrow in the first place?

On indeed.com, would you believe!

Oh the job website?

Yes! I was just scouting and that's how I found Communigrow. Then I looked at it and must have come to volunteer after looking at the website. I was drawn here because it combines the community with the growing. I think it's a very special place because it does both. The ethos here just makes complete sense to me.

What do you see as the biggest challenges facing you in your new role here?

Oh, I think you need to ask me after this growing season! [Laughs]

[laughing] Because at the moment you're fresh and everything is shiny and everything is possible?

Yes, yes! I have lots of ideas. I don't know how many of them are achievable but I have lots of aims and wonderful wish lists. I think this year is about understanding what has gone on before, getting the new staff on board and working out any changes we need to make in the future, then I can attack my wish lists. At the moment it's just trying to get things done in the best way possible with the time frame that we have. This is a slightly different year, so next year I will have more of an action plan!

What brings you most joy working and being in the field here?

I do love getting my hands in the soil when I can. But also, it's the people. You were saying earlier Communigrow attracts the most wonderful people who come down. Sometimes I'm so busy I don't get to talk to people as much as I would like. But it would be nice to work more alongside people if I can. It's just being here and watching things grow. It's a joy.

How do you feel the veg boxes are going right now? I know your role is more about coordinating the volunteers, but do you have any thoughts, feelings or hopes about them?

When we have more time, I'd like to concentrate a bit more on the interesting exotics. I like the idea of getting out some okra. They look really interesting. It's the mainstay we're concentrating on at the moment but if we can get some more exotics in the boxes, I think that would be fun. Obviously with the mainstays, but also trying something different.

What has the field given to you in your time here so far?

Personally, it's been very fulfilling. I have worked in places where I've ended up staring out the window because it's not been personally fulfilling, it's not reached my core of what I'm about. So, for me it's personal fulfilment.

And what do you hope to give to the field in your time here?

I hope to empower as many people as possible. That's my main aim. So, it's facilitating and empowering their learning.

And finally is there any advice or encouragement you would give to anyone looking to join in with Communigrow?

I like that it's a relaxed atmosphere here. I want to help to continue to create a pleasant, fun place but not somewhere where people feel pressurised to do or learn certain things. It's a place where, if people are interested in certain things, we can maybe help them look at those. I like to think of it as a place of choice, a sociable place where people can come and chat and learn.