

P-Patch, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON



In 1973, the city of Seattle, Washington, launched its first community garden at a farm owned by the Picardo family (the P in “P-Patch”). The plot had no water lines; gardeners actually had to fill up milk jugs and other containers to carry water to their patches. P-Patch nearly failed in the early 1980s when Seattle experienced a serious economic downturn. But the gardeners persevered, winning national awards, and P-Patch became the largest municipal community gardening program in the country.

Today, there are seventy-six P-Patch gardens spread across Seattle, on twenty-three acres, with forty-seven hundred gardeners. Some gardeners live below the poverty line, and some have visited a food bank in the last year. Almost a third of the gardeners get a majority of their produce from their garden plots in the spring and summer months, and about a quarter do so in the winter. About

a third of the gardeners also donate some of their harvest to food banks and feeding centers: 20,889 pounds of fresh produce were given away in 2010.

Michael and Rebecca McGoodwin have been growing produce in their P-Patch plot since 2003.

“Rebecca comes from a long line of farmers and gardeners, while I had spent years trying to avoid getting my hands dirty in the garden. But since we started, I’ve been coming up to full steam. Most people would probably want a garden on their own property, but P-Patch gardening offers a special atmosphere and advantages not found on private land. Beyond being able to share communal resources such as tools and compost, we get to know our fellow garden-

THE ORIGINAL P-PATCH SITE

The original garden site was on the Picardo family farm. Today, P-Patch gardens exist across Seattle. P-Patch provides communal resources, like tools and compost. The garden plots are organic, and by agreement, gardeners don’t sell the vegetables they grow.

ers and can chat over the crop rows with casual passersby. We also have many chances to get together down at the ‘Patch’ with fellow gardeners for informal potluck suppers where we exchange notes on what plants are working well.

“There are frustrations, however. We lost potatoes and beets in 2008 to an invasion of rats (neighboring gardeners lost sugar snap peas), and in 2006, in part because there are no fences, eight prized winter squashes that we had babied all through the hot summer were stolen. But we have persevered.

“While store-bought vegetables are getting more and more expensive, the primary benefit of raising your own vegetables is the deep satisfaction that comes from returning to the basics of tilling the soil, raising the crops, and thereby addressing our most primitive needs for sustenance. Getting to the P-Patch can also present a welcome respite from the urban rat race and seem like a little trip to the country.”

—MICHAEL MCGOODWIN