

## **A Cat's in the Garden**

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Master Gardener and south-eastern Grafton County resident Carol White (otherwise known as Cat) has spent many afternoons in gardens. As a vegetable and flower gardener for the past 63 years, she is no stranger to the rituals involved in getting a seed to turn into a plant and a plant to turn into a meal. Rituals that include hours of kneeling over weeds, daily, blank-minded watering sessions, and a devoted covering and uncovering of plants around nights that threaten frost. Eager to share this knowledge and experience with her community, Cat initiated Alexandria's first community garden in spring 2009. With funds from the NH Master Gardener Association, volunteer labor, and lots of determination and hard work, the 2009 gardening season was a success. Such features as the renowned "salad bars", which are really two whiskey barrels filled with lettuce, cherry tomatoes, and herbs, made the gardens a routine break point for cyclists, children on summer vacation, and people on their way home from work.

Though this year's garden could boast harvestable lettuce and salad mix, blossoming tomatoes and squashes, and tall, sturdy, bean plants in June, Cat admits that it has not always been "skittles and beer." The original soil was mainly sand and rock, which demanded that much of their first year effort and funds went into bagged compost and soil additives. Last year's gardening rollercoaster was at its peak as everyone watched the tomato plants thrive due to all of these soil amendments, but it plummeted when the appearance of late blight forced Cat to pull and discard their beautiful, fruit laden plants.

The tomatoes are in a new spot this year and everyone's fingers are crossed against another late blight epidemic. So far the garden shows little sign of pest or disease damage of any sort. The biggest problem is that in order to escape the delinquent pumpkin patch the police department had to find a new parking spot for their cruiser—a fact that will delight the Alexandria School children when they come to harvest the pumpkins again this fall. Cat is growing the ever-bearing strawberries in special synthetic mulch which lets water through but keeps the plants cool, an idea she picked up at a strawberry growers' festival in Florida this past winter. It is this creativity and willingness to try different things that helps keep the project going. Cat is wary about getting too big though. With the existing beds there is enough to keep Cat and the occasional volunteer in a tight race against the weeds, and enough to allow for the lucky person who stops by at just the right time to leave with some fresh, local ingredients for their next meal. To date Cat has given away 38 quarts of greens, 57 zucchini, 48 summer squash, 10 cucumbers, 16 head of cabbage, ½ a bushel of Swiss chard, and immeasurable handfuls of strawberries and cherry tomatoes.

All of this produce comes from the 968 square feet of veggies that Cat has "wrapped around the town hall", and she hopes that seeing what she has been able to do in a relatively small area will show people that it doesn't take acres of land to grow a few vegetables.

These gardens are located in front of the Alexandria town offices. Stop by to see the edible landscape for yourself. For more information about this project, the Grafton County Master Gardener Program, or other community gardens in Grafton County call the office at (603) 787-6944.