

New Roots

Bristol



Gardens of Sanctuary Case Study

Community growing spaces welcoming, supporting and working alongside refugees and asylum seekers

New Roots

Established in:	2009
Location:	Bristol
Website:	https://www.facebook.com/groups/589732794536816/
Structure:	Unincorporated Association
Staff:	None
Volunteers:	3 core volunteers

Project History

New Roots was started in 2009 by Tim Lawrence. The project is based on four full-size allotments which are screened off from neighbouring allotments by wild plums, blackthorn and other trees and shrubs creating a sheltered space.

For the first year, Tim, one asylum seeker and some volunteers worked to clear part of the overgrown site in order to be able to grow their first harvest of onions and beans. Over the next couple of years, more people came – mostly through word of mouth – including a large number of Iranian people who would initiate parties and barbecues. There were also people attending from Eritrea, Sudan and elsewhere. This felt like a good community which worked well together and was loosely facilitated by Tim and by Rose Codnor.

After the first few years, leadership was handed over to a man from Somalia who had just received his leave to remain papers, and Tim stepped back. He found it difficult to keep the energy in the garden and very few people came that summer which led to him feeling disappointed. Work slowed significantly on the allotment as a result.

After that year another local volunteer took on the project before Rose assumed responsibility in early 2017. Rose identified a number of barriers to participation that had arisen including the loss of knowledge and energy that Tim had brought to the site, the lack of time available for the coordinator as there was little or no funding for the role and

a tendency therefore for them to get burned-out and frustrated.

Current Services

When Rose took on responsibility she put out a call for volunteers but specifically demanded that they were able to commit to being there every week. From this call-out, three women became part of the core volunteering team with Rose and they began to clear overgrowth that had started to take over the allotments and put a plan in place for planting and growing. Other people began to join them during the year – including sanctuary seekers who already knew the project from previous years - and within a year the project was fully up and running again. The bee hives that had been inherited were handed over to an Iraqi couple who kept bees back home and who now look after the hives and give out honey to people in the community.

At the end of 2017, Rose put out a call to friends, potential partners and others in the area to take part in conversations about the future of the site and the project. There was a lot of engagement in these discussions and it was decided that the project would work better as a venue rather than a service-provider. They started looking for other groups who had their own insurance, funding and staff who wanted to use the site.

During 2018, four groups used the site regularly including a men's group, a mentoring charity for autistic children, Off the Record who offer therapeutic services for young people and the Natural Resilience

project which offers nature-based opportunities to refugee Mum's and their children.

The Natural Resilience project started in London but began offering opportunities at another site in Bristol earlier in 2018. At the end of that programme it was suggested that some of the Mum's and children who had been involved might like to continue to meet at New Roots which many of them have done. All the families get involved in growing food and take a veg box home each week.

New Roots have also used some money they have raised to pay for a permaculture teacher to run monthly sessions for any volunteers and others interested to learn more about food growing. This has taken the garden from being very sparse in terms of harvest in 2017 to exploding with productivity one year later.

Outcomes

The main outcomes for sanctuary seekers using the site has been the opportunity to find a community where they feel safe and can make friends. It is a peaceful environment

Case Study: S.

S. came to Bristol from Iran in 2007. His claim for asylum fell through and without support to put in an appeal, he became homeless and destitute. He was housed by Bristol Hospitality Network (BHN) and through this started to come to the garden. He is a talented carpenter and seemed to understand easily why it's great to spend days out in a garden. He came every week for the weekly work session for about a year and a half. He said he used to do this back in Iran, helping his Uncles on the farm. He put his skills to very good use, building the compost loo and a raised outdoor kitchen area, ringed with beautiful benches, which are still in use today. Through the advocacy of BHN he went on to receive leave to remain and immediately started work as a carpenter. Because of the relationships he had made through the garden he managed to find work, references and a place to live quickly. Now ten years later, he is still an active member of the group's extended social network - living with friends of friends of the garden, and working as a carpenter.



where a lot of informal cultural exchange takes place. Many women in particular say they feel at home in the garden space where they recognise so many things from their home countries. For some people it offers positive memories of growing up on their own family farms and smallholdings, and a break from thinking about your asylum claim and personal situation.

Problems and Barriers

The garden works best when there is no pressure or expectation on refugees and asylum seekers to ensure there is productivity. During the times when people seeking sanctuary have felt a need to produce large amounts of food, the atmosphere was not relaxed and people drifted away from the project. Now that the group has the capacity from local volunteers to keep on top of the garden, it is much easier for people to come and just enjoy the space – and to get physically involved as much as they want to.

The vast majority of sanctuary seekers involved with the project have been women with only a very small number of men getting involved. New Roots are not sure why this is,

and it is interesting that this is the opposite to what many similar projects are experiencing.

At times local volunteers have been involved with the project whose behaviours put off sanctuary seekers from being involved. At one time there were a lot of people coming to the site who were taking illegal drugs, bringing dogs and not respecting the space. It took a change of people involved in the project to put a stop to this and create a space that felt safe and welcoming again.

New Roots have also had some challenges from the owners of other allotments on the site. It is mostly well-intentioned but some sanctuary seekers find themselves being questioned almost to the point of interrogation.

Future Plans

There is a need for new energy and input to consolidate the changes that have happened at the garden. There is potential to work with other refugee charities in Bristol and now that the right infrastructure in place, the garden feels ready to do this.

Compiled by Sophie Antonelli and Ben Margolis

For more information about Gardens of Sanctuary go to <https://gardens.cityofsanctuary.org>

Gardens of Sanctuary is a partnership between *Social Farms & Gardens*, *City of Sanctuary* and the *Permaculture Association*. We have a shared vision of a network of green spaces with a culture of welcome, in which asylum seekers and refugees feel safe and appreciated as valued contributors and co-creators of community gardens and environmental projects across the UK.

For those who arrive to seek asylum in the UK, community gardens, city farms and other community growing spaces can offer vital and unique opportunities to find community, improve mental and physical health and to learn and share skills.

Our case studies and report are intended as useful resources for any community growing space who is working with refugees and asylum seekers, or who would like to welcome them in the future. Find all our resources on our website [here](#).

