

Increase

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driver and passenger witch-up

Port Chester men
agedly traded places
while driving drunk
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1⁰⁰ per copy
49⁰⁰ per year

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locally owned and operated
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Weber Community Gardens are a go

By CLAIRE K. RACINE

Growing up in the South, gardens were an expected part of Rita Paige's life.

"Everybody had gardens," she said. "We all had big gardens."

In New York and specifically Port Chester, however, they are much less common and not something a resident of public housing could easily have.

"People who have houses, they can have gardens," said the Weber Drive resident.

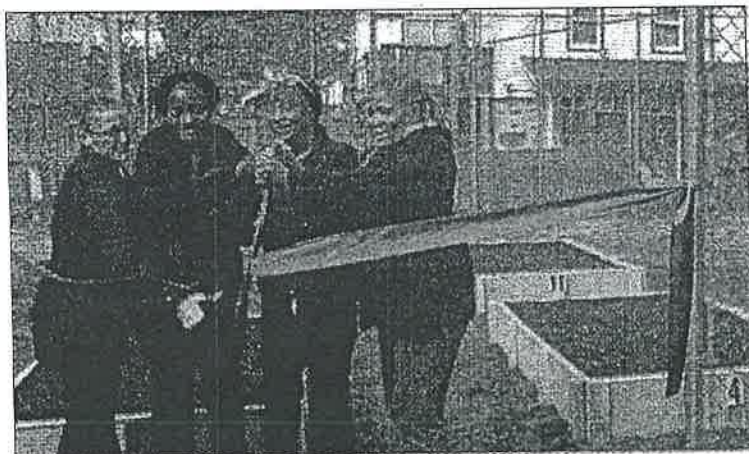
Having a house is no longer a requirement to have a personal garden thanks to the Weber Community Gardens. The brainchild of the community group Port Chester Cares, the 15-bed gardening space lies between Weber Drive and Midland Avenue, allowing people like Paige to grow their own affordable, healthy, sustainable produce. The land used for the project belongs to the Port Chester Housing Authority, but

the local agency was quick to see the benefits of Weber Community Gardens.

"It's a great day for our tenants, for the Housing Authority, for the whole community of Port Chester, really," said Executive Director Bob Vyskocil at the ribbon-cutting ceremony on Saturday, Apr. 2.

Weber Community Gardens has been in the works for months and the idea for it planted years ago.

"They kept passing out flyers and (they were) in the mail," said Paige, who also attended a gardening workshop last May to spread the word about the gardens. Almost one year later, Paige is getting ready to start planting and is already thinking about the fresh produce that she will have this summer. The Port Chester resident knows that gardening takes time and effort, but that is something she is actually looking forward to doing.



The Senior Director of Healthy Living at Rye YMCA helps three soon-to-be gardeners cut the official ribbon at Weber Community Gardens on Saturday, Apr. 2. From left: Laura Tiedge, Rita Paige, Grace Young and Sheila Oliver. CLAIRE K. RACINE | WESTMORE NEWS



Rory Marks, 4, and his cousin Branden Simmons, 4, eagerly hold their hands out for seeds from Branden's mother LaShondia Simmons. Weber Community Gardens, which boasts 15 garden beds for residents of the Port Chester Housing Authority to use, opened on Saturday, Apr. 2.

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"Right now I'm not working. I'm sick," she explained. "[Gardening] gives me something to do."

Tomatoes, please

Having grown up with gardens, Paige is well aware of the difference between a store-bought and homegrown tomato, for example. "It tastes so different," she said. "That's what I want to plant—some tomatoes."

With tomatoes at the top of her list, Paige, who nabbed the first plot, has plans to plant greens, peas and some cucumbers, too.

Further down the row at plot number six, LaShondia Simmons is also ready to get some seeds in the ground for tomatoes, but she has jalapenos and carrots as her

next go-to vegetables to plant. Although she has participated in an annual garden at work, Simmons has never had one of her own and is thrilled for the opportunity.

Like Paige, Simmons remembers hearing about the gardens but did not follow it as closely as her fellow Weber Drive resident. In fact, she had no idea Saturday was the day to sign up for plots.

"I didn't know. My mom, she called me. 'Come get a bed,'" Simmons said.

Following her mother's advice, Simmons brought her four-year-old son and her four-year-old nephew with her and snagged one of the gardens. The two boys ran around and scattered clover seeds

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Victor Ziminsky IV, the owner of Let it Grow Landscapes in Mount Kisco, who is acting as the official "garden guru," explained that clover is an easy-to-grow plant that can organically provide benefits similar to nitrogen-rich fertilizers. Simmons, who said she is sure the boys will often lend their helping hands to her garden, is glad her son will be able to benefit from the fresh vegetables and the experience in general. "He'll be excited watching it grow, I'm sure," she said.

Future plans

In its inaugural year, Weber Community Gardens is free for participating residents, who have to agree to a one-year commitment. Next year, the idea is to have participants chip in \$25 for the whole growing season to help cover costs. "Just to help us raise funds for garden tools, seeds, soil and maybe more plots," Payan explained.

The goal is to expand in the future and add more beds, including ones that are raised up higher from the ground making them accessible for people in wheelchairs.

Looking towards the future, Payan also has hopes for a Weber Community Gardens' farmers market.

"I'm really excited about the potential of doing a farmers market," he said. Residents would be able to sell their own produce and add an entrepreneur aspect to the whole project.

Even though residents got their plots on Saturday, some aspects of the garden setup had not been completed yet. The next week the gate arrived to secure the site—residents will have the combination for the lock—and soon, there will be a compost station organized to the rear of the garden space.

Payan also has a wish list of items still needed to really complete the site. At the top of that list is a small garden shed large enough to house a wheelbarrow and store residents' tools. At this point he has not purchased one in the hopes that someone might step forward to donate a shed. Weber Community Gardens is also looking for donated garden tools and seeds to benefit the residents. Anyone interested in contributing can contact him at apayan@fsw.org.



Five-year-old Cielo Vintimilla peers at the teeny, tiny tomato seeds her mother Mercedes holds in her hand.

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Eventually, Payan would like to purchase a produce scale, as well. The produce scale will allow Port Chester Cares to quantify how much is grown—something that is simply fun for residents to know and something that can help the community group secure future grants to defray costs of running the site. On a related note, Payan would like to get a set of patio chairs and a table and set them up towards the back of the space to serve as a place for residents to hang out and act as a gathering spot for garden workshops.

To get the soon-to-be gardeners started, Kathy Carley-Spanier, the director of Community Health at Greenwich Hospital, provided goodie bags on Saturday containing gardening gloves, seed packets and a four-piece planting set that included a kneeling cushion and trowel. Now they just need some sun and rain—both of which showed up for the ribbon-cutting ceremony—to get their gardens growing.



Gardening guru Victor Ziminsky IV, the owner of Let it Grow Landscapes in Mount Kisco, shows children how to scatter clover seeds in the barren sections of land near the garden beds.

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Family Services of Westchester
Healthier Port Chester Committee
Port Chester/Rye NAACP
Port Chester Cares
Port Chester Housing Authority
Rye YMCA

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