

DATE: November 13, 2024

TO: Parks and Recreation Commission

FROM: Maureen Grzan-Pieracci, Recreation Supervisor
Colin James, Recreation Manager
John R. Marchant, Community Services Director

SUBJECT: **Community Gardens Update**

PRESENTATION

City staff from the Community Services Department will provide an overview on the history and status of the Willowgate, Latham, and Senior Center Community Gardens. Maureen Grzan-Pieracci, Recreation Supervisor, will provide the presentation.

BACKGROUND

The City of Mountain View’s Recreation Division currently manages three community gardens: Willowgate Community Garden, Latham Community Garden, and the Senior Center Community Garden. These gardens play a vital role in the community by providing residents with the opportunity to cultivate their own fresh produce, reduce stress, and engage with neighbors in an outdoor setting, thereby contributing to a healthier lifestyle.

Garden Features

- **Willowgate Community Garden** (Willowgate Garden) is the City’s longest-running community garden, featuring a total of 131 half and full plots. Since 2017, City staff began splitting plots at Willowgate Garden. As full plots become available, staff will continue the process of splitting plots into two half plots. There are currently 37 full plots remaining at Willowgate Garden. Splitting the plots opens more gardening opportunities to Mountain View residents and alleviates pressure on the waitlist. The gardeners at Willowgate Garden possess a diverse range of experience, with some cultivating their plots for several decades while others are relatively new to gardening, having only six months of experience. Additionally, Willowgate Garden serves as a hub for community engagement, hosting a gardening book exchange, a newly installed garden sundial, and various community-led gatherings. The garden also maintains wheelbarrows, rakes, and spades that are available for communal use.

- **Senior Center Community Garden** (Senior Garden) is available to Mountain View residents aged 55 and older, featuring 63 plots approximately 18' by 6'. The garden maintains one shed that provides access to communal tools such as wheelbarrows, spades, and trowels. The Senior Garden hosts workdays each quarter to maintain the communal areas such as pathways and the entrance.
- **Latham Community Garden** (Latham Garden) is the City's newest community garden, opening in 2019. The total cost of creating this new community garden was approximately \$1,000,000. Latham Garden is host to 84 plots, 18' by 6' in size. Six of the plots are raised to meet Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines. The Garden maintains two sheds that provide access to communal tools such as wheelbarrows, spades, and trowels.

When Latham Garden opened, 10 plots were dedicated for a one-year short-term pilot program. Under the pilot program, gardeners were allowed to cultivate for one year before returning to the waitlist. Due to limited interest (only one gardener participated), the program was phased out. In 2022, following several years of low interest, the garden plots were reallocated to standard-term use.

Plot Availability and Waitlists

Currently, all garden plots have been allocated, and the City maintains an active waitlist. As plots become available, they are permitted to new gardeners on the waitlist in the order registered. The Community Gardens remain popular with Mountain View residents. There are 368 residents on the waitlists with up to a seven-year wait for a garden plot.

Renewals

Plot permits are issued on a year-to-year basis with only one plot allowed per household. Gardeners must apply annually in order to renew their garden plot. Prior to approval, plots and the adjacent pathways are inspected to ensure they are well-maintained and free of weeds. Renewals for Willowgate Garden, Latham Garden, and the Senior Garden are in October, April, and November respectively.

Fees

In 2017, with the introduction of half plots at Willowgate Garden and in anticipation of Latham Garden opening, fees were increased through a tiered rate system. Fees increased by \$10 annually from 2017 to 2020. The current fee structure is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Current Fee Structure

| Garden | Annual Plot Fee |
|--|-----------------|
| Senior Garden | \$50 |
| Willowgate Community Garden Full Plot (Regular Rate) | \$150 |
| Willowgate Community Garden Full Plot (Senior Rate) | \$50 |
| Willowgate Community Garden Half Plot (Regular Rate) | \$100 |
| Willowgate Community Garden Half Plot (Senior Rate) | \$50 |
| Latham Community Garden (Regular Rate) | \$100 |
| Latham Community Garden (Senior Rate) | \$50 |

Water Usage

Annual garden fees include water usage, ensuring gardeners have access to the necessary irrigation for maintaining their plots throughout the year. The water usage data listed below in Table 2 detail variability across seasons for the Latham and Willowgate community gardens from 2021 to 2024. The variability has been influenced by climate conditions, peak gardening seasons, and the potential use of drip irrigation. Water consumption at both gardens follow a seasonal pattern, peaking in summer and reducing in cooler months.

Table 2: Cumulative Water Usage at Latham and Willowgate Gardens from 2021 to 2024

| Season | Latham Garden Average Units | Latham Garden Average Gallons | Willowgate Garden Average Units | Willowgate Garden Average Gallons |
|--------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Winter | 45 | 33,909 | 37.63 | 28,143 |
| Spring | 51 | 37,898 | 110 | 82,363 |
| Summer | 168 | 125,414 | 219 | 163,438 |
| Fall | 154 | 115,067 | 139 | 103,691 |

With 46 additional plots, Willowgate Garden consistently uses more water than Latham Garden. However, managing water usage efficiently, especially during peak months, remains a key focus for sustainability in the community gardens program. Over the years, many of the gardeners have installed and utilize drip irrigation systems. Additionally, garden staff routinely distribute water conservation reminders and tips.

On the Horizon

The community garden program continues to expand communication and educational opportunities for garden members. Beginning in 2025, a refreshed quarterly newsletter featuring workshops, gardening tips, and general program reminders will be distributed. Staff also continues to connect with community groups and City departments to host informational workshops related to gardening, such as composting, winter garden prep, and propagation.

MGP-CJ-JRMAF/6/CSD

224-11-13-24M