



## Naturewise Community Forest Garden – June 2021

**Organisation name:** Naturewise

**Project name:** Community Forest Garden

**Location:** Pembrokeshire, Wales.

**Grant amount:** £10,000

**Award date and duration:** May 2019, 1 year

**Project context:** The forest garden is owned and run by the community, with an eco-shop and café on site. Claire, the co-founder, had previously run a forest garden in London for 10 years then moved to Wales with an ambition to do the same thing on a larger plot. She now runs the garden along with Cat, a Director at Naturewise.

**Project aims:** It aims to provide a sustainable food source for the community, to teach people how to grow their own vegetables and care for plants, and to encourage a love of nature.

### Project aims

The five-acre garden space has been developed both for the benefit of the volunteers, who are actively involved in the decisions of what to do with it, and for the benefit of others in the community. Whilst it is open to all, it has specifically engaged with school children, Welsh speakers, and those using the services of local mental health organisation, some of whom may face addiction issues or who have experience of the criminal justice system. The land was transferred to the community by the Welsh Government in 2017 and is now run as a community interest company.

With the garden, they want to:

- Present an answer to the environmental challenge by encouraging people to take an interest in where their food comes from and how it is grown.
- Empower people to grow things themselves or to source things locally.

- Try and change the perceptions that they know some people in their community have about a forest garden “not being for them”.
- Encourage wellbeing and combat social isolation in the local community by providing a safe and welcoming space for people to come and spend time together. The pandemic has meant that this is even more of a priority.
- Address food shortages in the local area. They plan to supply the local food bank with donations; this is a long-term goal, which they feel they will achieve once the garden is fully grown and the fruit trees are flowering.

## About the grant

The grant funding from The National Lottery Community Fund came at the very beginning of their journey and has been instrumental in helping them to lay the foundations of the forest garden.

The grant went towards recruiting Sarah, a **Welsh-speaking volunteer coordinator**, whose role was to help train volunteers in the garden. This was really important as the farm is an area of Wales with a high density of Welsh speakers and they want to encourage and support people to use the language. With the grant money over the past year they have been able to hold seven ‘planting days’, where they planted over 100 fruit trees and bushes.

With the grant money, they hosted a **permaculture planning weekend** with 14 volunteers in July 2019, and an open day (also in July 2019) so that the wider community could find out a bit more about what they were doing with the space. They invited a local mental health organisation to this and since then have been able to welcome people who are receiving support for their mental health.

Part of the grant also went towards promoting and running **forest schooling sessions**, which aim to teach both young people and the wider community about how a forest garden works. In 2019, Claire arranged for the Year 5 children from the local school to come for 20 weekly sessions over the course of an academic year. This idea was for this to culminate in a performance in which the children would present back to parents about what they have learnt, which Naturewise hoped would both raise the profile of the garden and also reach a more diverse range of parents.

## Project set up and delivery

They are keen to be as inclusive as possible with the space and so the garden is open to anyone from the local community, with word of mouth an important way for

people to find out about the project. People usually come to the forest garden to try it out for a day; many then end up returning to volunteer again and again.

Volunteers spoke of becoming involved for a range of different reasons: some started volunteering because they want to learn more about gardening or because they care about being involved in a sustainable project for the future and want to do something for their community. A couple have had more time on their hands since retiring or being on furlough during the pandemic. Others have been referred from the mental health organisation.

Claire and Cat try to make sure new volunteers feel as comfortable as possible. Whenever somebody new joins, they get a tour of the site, and a full induction and safety briefing. The process of sharing out tasks is very democratic: tasks that need doing are written on a board at the start of the day, and everyone comes together to discuss and decide who is doing what. As far as possible, they try to match jobs to the volunteer's ability.

"It's great that you can decide what you want to do and they are really encouraging of that. One day I had the idea to build a bridge over the stream, so I went off with a friend to do that. It took us a day and then when we'd done, we called everyone over. They were really impressed at what we'd managed." **Dan, volunteer**

The volunteers all like that the forest garden feels truly volunteer-led. They feel they genuinely have freedom to make things happen and like that they can choose the task and whether to work independently or in a small group.

## Project impact

### Key highlights

#### Numbers supported

- They have welcomed around 80-100 volunteers since the garden opened; 802 volunteer hours have been recorded in total between June 2019-June 2020.
- 70 people came to their Open Day, and 14 to the permaculture weekend.
- c.15-20 core volunteers have helped to plan and maintain the land over the last year, averaging 40+ sessions a year.
- They hosted five day sessions with 60 Year 5 children from the local school, as well as 10 forest school sessions over the course of the year, with around 10 children attending each week. Some places were subsidized to make this affordable.

#### Key impacts

- It has helped the community stay connected and reduced social isolation during the pandemic.
- It has improved people's wellbeing and physical health.

#### Website

<https://naturewise.org.uk/naturewise-community-forest-garden-cic/>

Claire and Cat feel that the forest garden is on track to have the sort of impact that they had envisioned. They feel that perceptions of the forest garden as being 'not for everyone' are slowly changing as the word spreads about the project. Volunteers were also keen to talk about the difference that getting involved had made to them.

### People had more social contact

People have made friends and there is a sense of community. One of the most important benefits for those using the garden is the social connection it has given them. Several volunteers felt they would have been extremely socially isolated over the pandemic if they hadn't had the garden.

"There is a real joy in lighting the bonfire and sitting around and having a relaxed chat over a cup of tea." **Beth, volunteer**

## People's mental health and wellbeing was better

Both Claire and Cat have observed a positive impact on the mental health of many of those visiting the garden; for one or two people, this improvement has been particularly striking in that they appear more secure and better at talking to people.

One of the beneficiaries, Dan, was signposted to the community forest garden from the mental health organisation. He has been a gardener in the past so has appreciated using those skills again. He now works as a chef, which he finds can be

"I feel lucky knowing it's there and sad that not everyone knows about it. I honestly think it's been life-changing for me... I just feel happier in myself."

**Dan, beneficiary**

quite a pressurised job, and so being able to come and spend time outside in the garden once a week is important and has helped him to manage his mental health issues. While he is also volunteering at a local farm, he feels like the forest garden has been an important part of his rehabilitation.

For some, there is satisfaction and reward in seeing the fruits of their labour: blossom coming up on the trees, the first seedlings coming up or being able to eat the raspberries. This has given them a sense of purpose.

## People's physical health was better

There have been physical health benefits for several volunteers. Beth has enjoyed that being involved in the garden has meant she has stayed active in retirement, while Dan acknowledged that he has lost some weight and feels healthier.

## More people have opportunities to mix with others who are different to them

Others commented about the fact that the garden is open to both children and adults makes it feel inclusive. One retired volunteer spoke in particular about how they loved that the garden was open to everyone and that they enjoyed seeing the children getting involved alongside the adults.

"For me, it's seeing the children playing alongside the adults. One little boy sticks in my memory particularly... he wanted to help his dad and would push a little wheelbarrow alongside his dad which was just so heart-warming to see the two of them." **Beth, volunteer**

## Overall reflections

Key to the project's success has been the fact that Claire and Cat have worked hard to make the forest garden somewhere that people will enjoy spending time and to foster a friendly and relaxed environment. They are particularly proud that they are able to welcome everyone from the community, including those with specific and complex needs such as poor mental health. Everyone agreed it is a beautiful space and feels very safe, with no pressure to be a certain way or to do anything you don't want to do, with Dan being particularly grateful that the staff are so non-judgemental about his past and mental health struggles.

Another success is that they involve everyone in the decision about what to do in the garden and really make everyone feel as though they belong and that they have a say. Claire, Cat and Sarah have all learnt a lot about how to run a volunteer-led project and emphasised the importance of communication to ensure that people understand what needs to be done to achieve the project's overall goals, everyone knows what the others are doing and check in with each other. While this isn't always perfect, and occasionally people do go off and do their own thing, which can be resource intensive to manage, they are striving to make it as joined up as possible. They plan to hand over more of the day-to-day running to volunteers in future; something which volunteers also seem very keen for.

"It's like trying to run a big event every week."  
**Claire, founder**

The pandemic has also been a learning curve: it was difficult to keep new plants and trees alive when access to the garden was restricted. It also made it difficult for the project to reach everyone as it wanted to. For example, they wanted to engage more with community groups and have food bank users coming to the garden. Engaging with schools is also on hold for now.

There have been upsides, though: because of certain activities being paused, the grant has been diverted to funding the volunteer coordinator post and materials for the forest garden; this has meant the funding lasted for a longer period than planned. They plan to resume wider community engagement once Covid restrictions allow.

## About the case study

As part of this case study, IFF Research spoke to Claire and Cat, co-founder and Director of Naturewise Community Forest Garden, along with a volunteer coordinator, Sarah\*, and three volunteers/beneficiaries, Dan\*, Beth\* and Molly\*.

*\*Names have been changed.*