



Gardens4Health

Anissa Ljanta discovers an organisation celebrating 10 years of grassroots goodness.

My interest was piqued when I learned my favourite urban community garden was part of a web of 80 gardens all over greater Auckland. Further investigation revealed that this indomitable web was seeded and supported by something called Gardens4Health. I met with manager Richard Main to find out more.

Richard has been involved in the organic gardening scene and growing food for more than 40 years. Having worked as a technician, then tutor, at Unitec's School of Landscape and Design, he is deeply knowledgeable and committed to a vision of a healthier future. He is a man clearly in his dream job.

COMMUNITY GARDENS BIG AND SMALL

Gardens4Health community gardens demonstrate a range of models

and locations, including the grounds of a hospital, a marae, churches, empty lots, preschools, social enterprises, a spinal unit, and alongside community centres and cafés. Their largest garden makes \$15,000 to \$20,000 annually in sales, which then goes back into buying tools and building infrastructure. Other gardens are smaller. All have a focus on feeding families and bringing people together.

Gardens4Health is run by a team of three: Richard and colleagues Hari Narayan and Homer Xu. They network and collaborate with 200 partner organisations like Heart Families, Green Prescription, the Heart Foundation, and Enviroschools. Mostly funded by the Ministry of Health, and active in three District Health Board areas

Above: Murals at Triangle Park Organic Garden, Massey Hub.

Photo: Anissa Ljanta

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in Auckland, the Gardens4Health model would be easily replicated elsewhere – something Richard would love to see.

EXERCISE, TOGETHERNESS, HEALTHY FOOD

"Gardens are just as important as libraries," says Richard. "More than food, it's pulling people together." The Gardens4Health team see this played out every day. Story after story exemplifies that the psychological benefits of community gardens bringing people together for a shared purpose, getting fresh air, a change of scene from isolated homes, a sense of belonging and exercise, can be as vital as the fresh produce and health benefits.

Gardens4Health turns 10 this year. "We're in a happy place," says Richard. He's had 22 enquiries about new gardens this week alone. "I try to make it happen. I am loath to say no. We see how we can support, or we look to other organisations in our network."

It's a stretch sometimes. Funding has remained the same over the 10 years, despite Gardens4Health's growth and the increasing demand for support to create gardens.

One of the Gardens4Health team might provide support to some gardens fortnightly; other gardens are more independent. The team lets the people involved lead. The team is available to field questions, come in to the garden to help, support funding applications, advise, or provide resources from their library of documents. At last count, they had ninety resources on file.

PREVENTING DIABETES AND CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE

When I asked how Gardens4Health began, Richard laughs and says, "I WAS the beginning. It grew out of a Counties Manukau DHB initiative called 'Let's beat diabetes' in 2009. It had huge funds and a big connected team."

The initiative was in response to concerns about high rates of diabetes, especially in Māori, Pasifika and Indian communities, and the approach was multi-pronged: education ensuring access to medical support, exercise classes, weight loss and the community



Above: The Gardens4Health team: Homer Xu, Hari Narayan and Richard Main. Photo: Gardens4Health



Above: Richard Main at Dig It. Photo: Anissa Ljanta

Gardens4Health at a glance

- Founded in 2009
- Supports 80+ community garden initiatives in the Auckland area
- 200 partner organisations
- 3 facilitators working with 2400 people in their community gardens
- Distributes 800–1000 seed packs in a season
- www.facebook.com/Gardens4Health
- Diabetes Foundation Aotearoa: diabetesfoundationaotearoa.nz

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Top left: Triangle Park Organic Garden, Massey Hub. Photo: Anissa Ljanta

Top right: Richard Main with folks from Mandir Temple, which receives support from Gardens4Health for their garden.

Photo: Gardens4Health

Above: Strawberry tubs at Triangle Park Organic Garden.

Photo: Anissa Ljanta

garden project. The primary drivers were, and still are, to avoid diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

After nine months, Gardens4Health was seconded to the Diabetes Projects Trust (now Diabetes Foundation Aotearoa), to make it a neutral provider and have the scope to operate Auckland-wide.

ORGANIC OR NOT?

The Massey Hub Triangle Park garden has a sign proudly proclaiming that it's an organic garden, but not all garden projects supported by Gardens4Health share that commitment. Richard estimates that 60–70% of Gardens4Health gardens are fully organic.

"We provide OFNZ standards from the beginning of the garden planning stage and offer those as guidelines they might like to use. We don't tell people what to do.

"We don't have ownership of the gardens. It tugs at me because I would not use Roundup for example. We continue to massage their conventional practice toward organics. If we have any strain, it's that. Some gardens have chemical input. All we can do is show them a different pathway."

GATHERING AND SHARING SEEDS

Richard, Hari and Homer collect seeds from the web and bring them back to the office. There the seeds are dried, decanted into paper bags, labelled and kept in old school filing cabinets. From



4 x 4

These four community gardens provide a snapshot of the 80 gardens that are part of the Gardens4Health network.

1. **DIG IT** organic community garden has been going for 25 years. It's a hive of activity, and part of CCS Disability in Royal Oak. The garden beds are mostly raised, at a range of heights, to allow access for people with differing abilities.
2. **OMG (Organic Market Garden)** is an urban collaboration by For the Love of Bees, Kai Auckland, Stonesoup Syndicate, Gecko Trust and Phantom Billstickers. It's in production mode on a very small site uptown in Auckland's city centre, providing fresh produce for eateries nearby.
3. **Franklin Tongan Association Community Garden** is the largest in the Gardens4Health web of gardens. It's on 2.5 hectares in Pukekohe West and is run like an allotment set-up. There's a rugby league team, two churches and many families involved. They have a very senior, capable coordinator, qualified in agriculture in the Pacific. "This guy knows his stuff," says Richard. The Franklin Tongan Garden has two tractors and boasts garden rows of 150 metres long. From April through to September the focus is on winter greens and broccoli, cauliflower and other brassicas. In summer, corn, pumpkins, squash, kūmara and potatoes take pride of place in those epic rows. Harvested produce is distributed to food banks, sold to the local Farmers' Market and those who do the mahi get to take produce home. This garden feeds at least 140 people.
4. **Triangle Park Organic Garden** was founded eight years ago at the Massey Hub community centre with support from Gardens4Health. The gardens have been augmented by a food forest planted in 2018. Hub staff give produce away to those who need it, kids play, explore and learn in there and the many groups that use the community hub space all benefit.



Above: Rob (left) and a volunteer at Dig It

spring through summer Gardens4Health will hand out between 800–1000 packs of seed for free. Most of these are heritage varieties. They collect only organic, open pollinated seeds.

I asked if there were any unusual heirloom plants he liked to see growing. Without skipping a beat, Richard replied “Pears!”

Pears are a natural cross between a pea and a bean. You can eat the young pea whole, and the older pea can be used like a bean or pulse. Richard’s wife cooks it like a dahl. It is thought that Gardens4Health pea seeds originally came from Central Europe.

SOS – SAVE OUR SOILS!

One of the biggest challenges Richard sees is the diminishing availability of land to grow fruit and vegetables. Take Pukekohe, for example, in South Auckland. Auckland Council has just approved 34,500 new homes in Drury and Pukekohe. People have been expressing concern that these housing developments are planned on prime agricultural land; Pukekohe is well known for its productive food-growing soil.

Richard shakes his head. “We’re talking about the best soils in New Zealand, actually the best in the world. Volcanic silt clay loam – it’s unbelievable quality. The topsoil is 1½ to 2 metres deep. We could have 30 mm rain in half an hour and it would be fine. It’s been abused by chemical industrial practice, but the soil has resilience. It’s a national issue.”

“We have the capacity to feed Aucklanders right now,” he asserts. “Epsom, Glen Innes, Mangere and Avondale were all producing areas. We need to save our soil to grow local organic food to feed local people.”

The Franklin Tongan Association has a thriving garden so big they use tractors. It was completely rural ten years ago, now it’s bordered on three sides by new housing developments.

“Land tenure is a problem. We’ve lost six community gardens to property developments in ten years. It’s heartbreaking,” says Richard.

GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY GARDEN SUPPORT

Gardens4Health community gardens are not branded. There’s no sponsor logo requirements or slick marketing campaign. There is a lively Facebook page but mostly the Gardens4Health team are busy doing the work in the community rather than promoting the service on the internet. I find this incredibly refreshing amongst all the modern-day marketing noise.

Richard says, “I’m not averse to publicity but I haven’t been on TV or (much) radio. Very low key, very grassroots. We’re about hands in the soil. Our base is our connections in the community.”

Anissa Ljanta is a writer, not-for-profit professional, seamstress, blogger and keen gardener currently doing battle with snails on the wild west coast near Auckland. growmama.blogspot.com

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