

# **ActivGardens Projects in Sudbury**

**By Ruby Farrell (BMS Food Network Officer)**

Since we are in the summer months, we wanted to shine a spotlight on the benefits of growing food and herbs for wellbeing. ActivGardens provides outdoor opportunities for the local community in Sudbury and Great Cornard with a focus on wellbeing. I spoke with Phoebe and Jane from their team to find out more.

**Grow Your Wellbeing (Mondays with Phoebe):** A free 12-week outdoor learning course teaching horticulture in a safe and welcoming environment. Sessions involve teaching specific skills and completing jobs for the gardens, such as planting herbs, and more recently planting annuals in their wildlife corridor. Phoebe says, "Herbs are really popular with everyone. We have oregano, lemon balm, rosemary, and a lavender hedge which gets lots of traction from bees and pollinators. We tend to involve herbs in lots of our projects because they are sensory, which is great for our members."

Visit the [ActivGardens webpage](#) to find out more! To join the course or register as a volunteer, contact Project Manager Susannah Robirosa on 07530 407302 or email [susannah@activlives.org.uk](mailto:susannah@activlives.org.uk).

**Grow Your Community (Thursdays with Jane, 9.30am-12pm):** A free volunteering group for local residents interested in gardening, open to everyone. Members can join for as much of the session as they wish, with no commitment to attend every week. Together they maintain the gardens and wildlife spots in Belle Vue park, learning new skills and connecting with likeminded people. Typical sessions might include planting, grass cutting and pruning.



## ***What do you think are the benefits of growing food for your wellbeing?***

**Phoebe:** Growing and nurturing in nature is innate within all of us – we just need an activity to reconnect. Almost everyone in our groups mentions anxiety or social anxiety. Growing herbs together gives conversation points around the foods members like to cook and eat at home. The smells of different herbs regularly evoke lots of childhood memories for our members. Even if you don't know the herb, the smell can remind you of something from your past. Herbs are a really easy way to get started with growing if you have no experience. You can put them on your windowsill and use them every day when cooking.

**Jane:** Some of the benefits I believe are experienced in growing food for wellbeing include:

- Planting seeds, nurturing seedlings and watching your plants grow gives an enormous amount of satisfaction as well as providing year round opportunities that connect us with natural life cycles.
- You know exactly what has been used to grow the food, so you become more aware of what is going in to your body. This can contribute towards a healthy balanced diet.
- It is great exercise without really appreciating how much exercise can be involved.
- Community allotments can become great social places, enabling people to interact and develop social skills.
- A great activity for reducing stress and developing relaxation.

### ***What are the highlights of the projects so far?***

**Phoebe:** Seeing the results of the work from the group and people taking the skills they have learnt from the sessions back home. Members often take pictures of what they've been growing at home to show the group. The project empowers people with the skills, knowledge and confidence to grow at home. For example, one of our members was recently given an allotment plot and the course helped him plan his growing schedule. Another member works at a local pub and has taken his knowledge from the course to grow herbs, salad and vegetables which are used in the pub's kitchen.

**Jane:** Highlights include introducing the growing of a small amount of fruit, vegetables and herbs such as strawberries, climbing beans, kale, mint, oregano, and chives. We have recently planted some celeriac too! Also, taking a donation and planting of Mulberry Tree whips, developing areas of the park that have remained untouched in previous years, support from Babergh District Council, and being recognised for World Mental Health Day by receiving a donation of chocolate bars by Sudbury VASP. Finally, celebrating occasions together by either having a picnic together or an arranged lunch.

### ***What impacts do you think the project has had on its members and also on the community in Sudbury so far?***

**Phoebe:** Helping to reduce isolation and giving members talking points to share with their own families and friends. Everyone in the group gets on well together, and it feels easier to meet people at an activity like this because having a job to do takes the pressure off social anxieties.

**Jane:** Creating new friendships, learning, developing and sharing of skills, and having a place to retreat when other aspects of life are proving to be a little difficult. There is always someone who is happy to listen and chat, and volunteers ensure everyone feels welcome and included. The maintaining of the park's gardens provides a nice environment for the public to sit, contemplate, picnic and enjoy their surroundings. The volunteers have more plans they would like to introduce and hope to take to consultation, such as more more fruit and vegetable growing, a community orchard and wildflower area.



### **How can community food projects incorporate an element of food growing into their offerings?**

As we have seen, growing food and other plants has many wellbeing benefits. You could encourage food growing in your projects by offering workshops on growing herbs and food, encouraging plant propagation or seed swapping between members, or teaming up with a local community garden or farm for projects, campaigns and signposting.