

Silver City's Community Garden Thrives In Its Second Year

By **Quest Lakes, June 2010**

Silver City's community garden is blooming for this its second year, (2010) with the first tomatoes of the season appearing this week. Although the garden had a rough start this year with the odd weather, gardeners including Renate Victor and Susan Stornetta, among others, have planted herbs, flowers, strawberries, squash, etc. Local teens helped prepare the straw bale beds, and built planter boxes by recycling old lumber scraps. Plans are underway for youths to create a new scarecrow since last season's is in sad shape.

Garden coordinator Renate Victor said she would like to spread the word that people are welcome to participate in the community garden in any way they choose, and would also like people to feel welcome to gather at the garden and simply bring their goodwill to it. She envisions seating around the perimeter, possibly benches that would also be works of art created by residents of all ages. Another possibility is adding public art created by locals, perhaps art made from recycled materials.

Full funding for the garden for the next few years is expected due to a large stimulus grant awarded to Healthy Communities Coalition and task forces and other partners for a community foods project in the Lyon region. The funding is matched by all sorts of generous donations from the community and many hours of volunteer labor.

Renate Victor's description of the community involvement that led to the creation of the Silver City garden follows:

The History of the Silver City Community Garden

By **Renate Victor 2009**

A Shared Vision: We gathered at the Silver City Schoolhouse on a warm sunny Sunday; April 26th 2009, to determine if there was enough interest in starting a community garden project. Over the years we often spoke of communal gardening; in the park, in someone's yard, on the hillside west of the Schoolhouse, and now we were actually planning to build straw-bale beds somewhere in Silver City and grow our own vegetables. In addition to the gardening passions of a few faithful citizens, and the occasional support of many others, we were further encouraged by the fact that Comstock Youth Works (funded through Community Chest through Nevada Works' stimulus funds) offered a summer program for teens that provided a stipend for working in the Community Garden and clearing weeds and brush at the homes of seniors, to reduce fire hazards. The program also provided for an adult supervisor. We now had the work force to make our garden a reality.

A Town Works Together: At the second meeting of the gardening group on May 3rd, we learned that Bill Young, a long-time resident of Silver City, had offered his lot, across the road from the Schoolhouse on High Street, for our garden site; a perfect spot. We

established work groups: Planning and Design; Fencing; Composting; Straw-bale Assembly; Planting; and Irrigation. Two nonprofits, Healthy Communities Coalition of Lyon and Storey and Community Chest, Inc. provided \$600 for straw bales, fencing, seedlings, etc. Local resident Cashion Callaway agreed to manage a garden account and send acknowledgements and appreciations as needed.

The first miracle occurred after days of researching the quality and cost of soil and realizing what a huge expense that was going to be. In the midst of this dilemma there suddenly appeared at the garden site, two hills of beautiful brown dirt and topsoil; a generous gift from Art Wilson.

The garden site is an open field that is flooded in sunlight from east to west; dawn to dusk. It seemed pretty level to a 'Comstocker's' eye, with lots of dry, wild grasses and just as many rocks as you would expect in an empty field. Straw-bale beds would be great in this space. But the next miracle occurred when Silver City resident Beau Guthrie showed up with his front loader and said he would level the garden-site and help load the straw-bales. He got us moving, and thanks to Beau and the young people of this town, bales were set and the beds were filled with the soil. We all had pizza that day.

The early days of May found us 'playing in the dirt'. Resident Susan Stornetta brought "treats" for the soil and worked them in, Molly Allander and I drove to a ranch in Dayton where we shoveled aged sheep manure into the bed of her pick-up. We got a little surprise pelting of dirt and manure due to the back window being in the open position as we flew down 50 to Silver City.

Planting Day and a Surprise Hail Storm: We set a date for planting: Sunday, May 31st. The paler-than-usual sun may have accounted for a slow start to the day, but then kids don't take too well to early Sunday mornings, as I remember. Everyone finally assembled and without too much direction, went to work. Some planted seeds or small plants that were started in-door. Mary MacDonald, a local professional gardener, shared many small plants and advised us on gardening issues. We planted cabbage, carrots, beans, spinach, arugula, lettuce, cucumbers, eggplant, peppers, squash, pumpkin, carrots, beets, radishes, turnips, potatoes, and many, many varieties of tomatoes in a very long bed. We put in giant sunflowers as sentries for the western fence line. Some folks cleared the paths around the beds of rocks, stones and weeds; others watered. The young men proved their strength; working the post-hole digger, driving in posts to assemble the fencing, moving large boulders, constructing compost bins to add to the one that Michelle Kramer donated, creating a three-stage system. Silver City resident Ron Reno came down to the garden one day and put a bolt lock on the compost cage to keep the critters out.

Throughout the later morning hours, we heard the soft rumble of distant thunder. By 11:00 dark clouds began hovering and the sun seemed to fade gradually. Suddenly, a lightning flash came nearer with a thunder clap like an exclamation. "Drop the metal!" someone shouted. The boys sort of laughed, but almost immediately another lightning and thunderclap seemed close enough to touch, and we all hurried to put tools away just as the sky opened and showered us with a thick veil of hailstones that became louder, larger and more vicious as we dashed across the road and up the dirt hill to the side door to the Schoolhouse.

We stood in the foyer looking out through the glass at the thick hailstones; at the teen-agers out there on the road and on the grass, shrieking, laughing and writhing from the sharp stabbing ice pellets that finally drove them inside. The hills in the distance were eerie in a frozen white mist, and the roads, fields, trees, roofs of houses, sheds, cars, and power lines in town, shrouded in ice. Winter persisted for five more hours

The next miracle occurred as we checked the plants the following day. We walked the spongy paths around the beds; Mary MacDonald made the rounds, checking each plant for damages and judging the outcomes. "This one looks like it will make it. We'll just wait and see." Some plants were clearly destroyed. But what was miraculous was that most of the tender little plants were perfectly intact, protected, tucked into a nest of straw. Thanks to Susan Stornetta's adamant instructions, the beds were thickly mulched with straw that the heavy hailstones didn't penetrate.

We lost quite a few tomato plants but when Mary Mac Donald mentioned our hailstone planting woes to David Ruff at the Greenhouse Garden Center in Carson City, he donated 9 six-packs of Roma tomato plants to our garden. We had an outstanding tomato crop and nobody complained that there were too many.

Youths and Adults Both Worked to Create It: The Comstock Youth Works teenagers cared for the garden five days a week through the summer until mid August. They watered the plants, cleaned out the weeds, gathered willow twigs and branches to construct trellises to support the tomatoes that grew stronger and heavier by the day. They picked some of the greens and cucumbers for their lunch salads, and built a scarecrow that made friends with the visiting quail.

A regular group of women met early on Sunday mornings to hang out, assess the garden and compost, water what needed to be, and share gardening expertise and recipes for using the vegetables we were growing. We would nibble on lettuces, arugula, spinach, radishes, carrots plucked from the beds, and take home an eggplant or squash for dinner. Although we were able to harvest a few strawberries from hardy plants, we talked about planting more berries next time.

Our community garden was lush. The tomato beds looked like a jungle. The sunflowers grew tall and had to be braced for the wind. Of course some plants did better than others. We learned better ways to use the beds. The radishes were delicious. The tomatoes ripened slowly and were harvested late. A lot of salsa was made and it was all consumed. We used vegetables from the garden for the town's monthly community soup and salad dinners that are funded, in part, through the Silver City Task Force.

Visions of the Second Season: Silver City Community Garden is now in its 2nd season. We agree that we want to do multigenerational cooking groups; learn to use the vegetables we are growing, creatively. We plan to grow a partial bed of Poblana chili peppers which Cashion Callaway will teach us to process for preparing Mexican/Southwest cuisine in our Schoolhouse kitchen.

It will be a challenge to engage regular, committed workers for our garden, and it will be essential to maintain schedules for oversight and maintenance. Since we will not have the benefit of the Comstock Works program this season, we are trying to find ways to include young people to help with the garden. We are developing a system of earning points for service in hours that can be

redeemed for internet use, transportation, meals, events, privileges, and other options. We would like to include more children in our project; both gardening and cooking.

The real miracle of this project is the spirit of Silver City. We are a community of diverse individuals who may have little in common, but enthusiastically enjoy the things that unite us.