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New Garden Sharing Registry makes a match

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NORTH OF MONTANA — When a recipe calls for fruit or vegetables, Madeleine Grafton has her pick, not in the neighborhood grocery store, but in the backyard of her home where an orchard of orange, fig, apricot, avocado, lime and lemon trees thrive.

The once vibrant garden, however, had seen less tilling and weeding as old age caught up to the Santa Monica resident and her husband, that is until a stranger recently came in and volunteered to do the heavy lifting.

In exchange, the stranger — Santa Monica resident Ellu Green — would get a share of the crops.

The garden is now awaiting signs of life from six newly-planted beds of peas, beans, carrots, garlic, radishes, lettuce and herbs.

The partnership between Grafton and Green is the first match made on City Hall's new Garden Sharing Registry which pairs homeowners who have extra land with gardeners who don't.

Operated by the Community and Cultural Services Department, the registry has received applications from four homeowners and 12 gardeners since its launch in September, created to meet the growing demand for plots at the space-constrained community gardens throughout the city.

"People are excited about this opportunity," Kathy LePrevost, the community programs manager for City Hall, said. "We just need to get the word out more and let people know this is an option for them because there seems to be such an interest in gardening these days."

Interested applicants must fill out a form specific to whether they are a homeowner or gardener, the former answering questions about the square footage available on their property and the amount of sunlight exposure to the garden, the latter briefly describing their gardening experience and their time commitment.

City Hall only facilitates the registry and is not involved in arrangements made between the two parties.

Grafton received 10 names from City Hall and was most impressed with Green who noted in the application her experience working with AmeriCorps, which caught the homeowner's eye because her son also worked with the same organization.

"I did have qualms about having a total stranger coming into my property and getting to know my dog but you can't live life worrying about those kinds of things," Grafton said.



BUMPER CROP: Madeleine Grafton working in her home garden on Tuesday afternoon. Grafton partnered with another Santa Monica resident to help her plant new crops as part of the city's Garden Sharing Registry, which pairs homeowners who have extra land with gardeners who don't. *photo by Brandon Wise.*

Green, who works in the environmental and occupational health department at UCLA, was on the waiting list for a community garden plot for four years, never receiving a call from City Hall about an opening.

"It's a little bit of a risk because you never know what someone's expectations are going to be but it has worked out beautifully," Green, who lives in a townhouse, said.

Growing up on a farm, Green said she found gardening to be a form of therapy.

She gardens about five hours a week, mostly on the weekends.

There are more than 175 residents on the waiting list for three community gardens — Main Street, Park Drive and Euclid Park — that have about 117 plots amongst them. Applicants must be a Santa Monica resident and pay \$60 annually for their plot of land. It takes about five years on average to get a plot.

Residents have long called on city officials to expand the community gardens program by building more plots, including in the Pico Neighborhood where there are several vacant lots, including on the corner of 20th Street and Delaware Avenue.

"Shared gardening is a community-building benefit to both the homeowner and the gardener, and growing our own food locally can be an important part of Santa Monica's sustainability programs," Councilman Kevin McKeown, who advocated for the garden registry, said. "Our city-owned community garden plots remain oversubscribed, and turning unused lawn and yard space into productive shared gardens expands our capacity to build community and grow local food."