

## With Santa Monica community garden plots taken, some people learn to share

LA TIMES, October 13, 2010 | 4:47 pm



Ellu Nasser, a farmer's daughter from Oregon, moved here five years ago and has been on a waiting list to get into Santa Monica's Main Street Community Garden since then. About a year ago, she signed up for the [Santa Monica Garden Share](#) program instead, which matches willing homeowner with landless gardener -- an arrangement that has worked well in Britain, where the idea originated, and in the Pacific Northwest.

In Santa Monica, the program has been a harder sell. People are hesitant of strangers coming into their yards, says Madeline Ashcroft, 77, who teamed with Nasser to be the first match in the program. "It's a natural hesitation," Ashcroft said, adding that homeowners think, "This is my castle."

Ashcroft has lived in the same house for 43 years. She grew up in Bristol, England, and always had relied upon a garden for fresh produce. Her son was a soils major at Humboldt State and set up compost and worm bins in the backyard of the 50-by-160-foot lot years ago, before local garden stores carried them. When turning the compost pile became a burden, she started looking for some help and saw a [newspaper article about the garden share program](#). It sounded mutually beneficial: She got the strong back, while Nasser got a plot of land to tend.

"I really wanted to compost," Nasser said. "I had waited and waited, and when I got a call from the city, I was so excited. I'm sure it's weird to have someone come onto her property. It's a big

responsibility. I want to make sure that I meet her expectations. It's been a really sweet thing, for both of us, I think."

Nasser walks or bikes over for a couple of hours, once a week. The watering is on a timer, and Ashcroft's main role is to monitor conditions during the week and squash slugs. Nasser plans, plants, thins. And they both harvest.



They are on their second crop, following a winter of too many greens, carrots and onions. This summer season yielded basil, Italian parsley, cantaloupe, beets, tomatoes, squash, chard and habaneros. Nasser had six successive generations of pole beans going, started from heirloom seed her dad sent from Portland. But by her standards, their productivity was low, possibly from June gloom that seemed to last through much of summer.

A house at the end of the block raised a bed full of edibles in the frontyard, so with precedent set, the two women have been thinking about Ashcroft's frontyard. The backyard may be crowded by mature trees -- avocado, citrus, fig, apple -- but the sun comes early in front, and that yard is mostly lawn, prime for renovation.

"I was waiting to see how we did this year," Nasser said. "Now I'm open to the idea."

And what would she do if she gets a call from the city saying a community garden plot had opened up for her? Maybe nothing. "I don't even know if I'm on the list," she said.

Meanwhile, more than a dozen gardeners have signed up for the garden share registry looking for land to tend this fall. Information: (310) 458-8573.

-- Jeff Spurrier

*Photo credits: Jeff Spurrier*

**Next week: Santa Monica's Main Street Community Garden**