

# Garden of the Gods

## The Lexington Interfaith Project That's Growing More Than Just Crops

By Andrew Cook

Examine any major religion of your choosing across the globe, and in every one of them, you'll find a bevy of stories about gardens. The Jewish Talmud and Christian Old Testament each begin with Man's creation in (and later, exile from) the utopian Garden of Eden. In the Quran, Paradise for all faithful and worthy believers is symbolically described as *al-Jannah*, "the Garden." While nature here on Earth must be treated with respect and care by all observant Muslims as a gift from the Creator; ancient Buddhists purposely chose gardens as the sites for their first monasteries, with the understanding that nature was more conducive to a meditative mindset than a city environment. The idea of gardening even sneaks into older, more brutal and extinct mythologies, like the tales about the Norse gods of Asgard who retained their immortality by eating magic apples kept in a secret orchard.

Considered all together, there seems to be a certain otherworldly sacredness here at this intersection of horticulture and faith: some idea, reached independently by countless religions across history, that gardens can function as near-mystic areas, where separation from the divine seems to lessen and hushed practitioners can gather for some kind of strange communication with the universe-at-large.

Well, the Lexington Common is certainly hushed this rainy Saturday morning, but not in what could truthfully be called a prayerful sense — more in a, "check back once we've all woken and had our second coffee," sense. Wander just off the sleepy common, down a residential dirt driveway adjoining the First Parish Unitarian Universalist Church, and there's a garden there — but you won't find any robed monks or whispering disciples praying through its pathways.

No, this particular Saturday morning gathering is just a handful of cheerful, semi-wet volunteers, chatting conversationally amongst themselves in well-worn jeans and mud-stained sneakers. They're engaged in various tasks around a yard that seems torn from the pages of a home-interest magazine, complete with a rustic barn and even stacks of buzzing apiaries but dominated by a garden that's the size of several in-ground pools put together. The people inside it



Large photo: Carla Fortmann oversees a peaceful Saturday morning at the Lexington Interfaith Garden. Left, volunteers work. Right, the garden's bounty.



kneel down not to pray, but to reach budding rows of scallions, which are plucked from the soil and admired between gloved fingers. These scallions are then cleaned, weighed, and placed in a wheelbarrow, where they'll accompany several other trays of similarly just-picked rhubarb, garlic, and bok choy, for a five-minute walk across the street to the Lexington Food Pantry.

Call it Eden, *al-Jannah*, Paradise, if you want, but for the Lexington Interfaith Garden, this is just another Saturday morning.

"It's not like we're super religious people at all," says Amy Swanson, a volunteer from the Hancock United Church of Christ who helps coordinate the garden's logistics. "It's just this idea that so many people, in their faith communities, say 'well, what can we do that's concrete? What can we get involved in? Is there some way I can be of help right here in Lexington?'"

Located in a former horse paddock which Lexington resident Carla Fortmann has tended into its current state, the Interfaith Garden runs every summer from April to October. Under the green thumbs and nurturing care of growers from more than a dozen Lexington-area faith communities including the Chinese Bible Church of Greater Boston, the St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church, and Temple Isaiah, to name a few, the volunteer project sends donations of fresh fruits and vegetables on a weekly basis to the nearby Lexington Food Pantry.

"The backstory here is that there were four couples from First Parish who started a little giving garden — this is like ten, eleven years ago — on that little grass



patch right over there," explains Amy. "Carla had her own little personal garden right here, and they just... started chatting! Because y'know, Carla would be out here tending her garden, and they'd be out tending their garden, and they all just got friendly."

"They did a small garden, and only a couple of them really knew what they were doing," Carla Fortmann recalls with a chuckle. Carla's in the same place she is every weekend: right down in the dirt with her volunteers, overseeing today's scallion-picking and demonstrating to her volunteers the just-right technique about how to best pry the long-necked onions from the soil without damaging them. "But they just dumped bags and bags of manure on top of grass — they didn't even take the grass out first! — And they had *great* luck because we have beautiful sun here. And we shared talks and water and things like that, and then whatever they managed to grow, they gave it all to the food pantry."

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"You come here some day in July or August, we're carrying literally 200lbs or more over to the pantry, all different things," says Amy. "Different varieties of tomatoes, green beans, peas, lettuces, herbs... so those mornings are really busy."

And to say those efforts are appreciated by both the Lexington Food Pantry and, more especially, those it provides for, would be a near-comical understatement. A quick glance around the large, warmly-lit hall where the Pantry sets up on weekends shows tables piled high with canned goods, bread bags, cereal boxes, jars of peanut butter, etc. ... but one glaring absence becomes apparent: nutrition of the garden-variety.

Sometime later, there was an idea circulating throughout LICA – the Lexington Interfaith Clergy Association – about the possibility of establishing a community-based interfaith garden. The idea was warmly received by all within LICA, but could never progress beyond that initial "wouldn't it be great if—" idea stage. After all, where could such a project find roots, so to speak, and who could provide the gardening know-how necessary for the Food Pantry to receive more than an occasional, slightly-shriveled cucumber?

When word got out about Carla's friendly relationship with and tutoring of the small-scale First Parish project, however, then, in a phrase, prayers (in all their denominational varieties) were answered.

"Carla has played the *hugest* part in this project, right from its very beginning," says Amy. "She has a very generous spirit, and her energy is just something else. She's out here more than anyone – except for when she's out of town, or helping with her family, she's there every Tuesday and Saturday morning."

Those are the times when volunteers meet as part of an elaborate system worked out by Amy and her fellow garden volunteer Mark Sandeen, who oversee all schedulings and sign-ups. A typical Saturday will see anywhere from six to ten volunteers, doing anything from basic yardwork to light construction of garden structures, and everything in-between: planting seeds, harvesting and preparing crops, wheelbarrowing loads over to the food pantry, it's all par for the course here. Peak time comes mid-summer when most crops start producing heavy yields.

"The downside to the pantry, before this garden project was a thing, was that they didn't have any fresh produce," says Amy. "They had maybe *one* bag-full coming in every weekend or so from local farms, all of which have shut down over the years, so really, there was barely anything there at all for a while. And it makes sense if you think about it, fresh produce is expensive. It is! If people are on a fixed income where they're going to have to start cutting back, they're not going to be bagging a lot of fresh produce for their orders anymore. Whole Foods isn't an option for most of the people we see at the pantry, so we knew we'd be making a real nutritional contribution by whatever came out of this garden."

To keep making those sorely-needed contributions on a regular basis, Amy and Carla both stress that the garden's biggest need, year in and year out, remains people power. Over six hundred individuals have signed in for shifts since the Interfaith Garden's creation over nine years ago, but a fair amount of those have been a revolving door of one-off visits. A more stable body of participants is something both women say would go greatly appreciated. "We're always looking to get more people involved because you need a big pool to draw from, and you need new blood every year. People's interests or life circumstances may change, so if they were volunteers here formerly, they might have to shift to something else – and that's fine! That's life! It means we're always making new friends!"

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Cynthia Pfeiffer, Huining Liang, and Amy Swanson display their morning's harvest at the Lexington Food Pantry.



Wei-Sung and Amy Swanson harvest scallions.



Off to the Food Pantry using the Minuteman bike path.

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Huining Liang, 16, and Cynthia Pfeiffer transport fresh-picked vegetables across Lexington Common to the Food Pantry

If there is something mystical to be found about this place, beyond soil conditions that are *unusually* fertile, it's in that word right there: friends. Ethnic, social, denominational, and all other sorts of differences may try and divide or categorize people outside the garden boundaries, but ankle-deep in the tilled

earth, those differences all seem to disappear. Religions whose armies may previously have waged war against one another can all claim frequent representatives here, kind-hearted souls who walk side by side with a wheelbarrow laden down between them on the way

to deliver fresh crops for the hungry. As one of the chief schedulers, Amy is at least partially responsible for this apparent miracle of unity. "We always try to do at least two faith communities together, so that there's this... opportunity to learn from each other," she says with a smile. "I think it's something in each of us as a human being that... we want to be able to help. Yeah. And to me, I think that's something bigger than any one church, any one religion. We take *anyone* here, all experience levels, just so long as you want to help, and are up for having a little fun in the dirt doing it."

Examine any major religion of your choosing across the globe, and in every one of them, you'll find a bevy of stories about gardens. This special place, on an ordinary Saturday morning, deserves to go down with the best of them.

*To learn more about the Lexington Interfaith Garden, or to sign up for a volunteer slot, visit [www.interfaith-garden.org](http://www.interfaith-garden.org).*

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