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**GROWING
 TOGETHER**
Community Gardens in Eugene
 BY RACHEL FOSTER

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

Alice Aikens has been cultivating her plot at Amazon Community Gardens for 20 years. “I just pull my boots on and get down there,” she says — almost every morning, even in February. What’s so great about it? “I can eat fresh vegetables the day I pick them, and it’s nice to share tomatoes and cukes with family and friends in summer.” But Aikens also likes the challenge of gardening at Amazon. “You nurture not just plants but people. And I think it makes you a more responsible person — you are responsible for your garden, and the more time you put in the better it is.” Aikens’ very favorite thing to grow is sweet peas, especially a fragrant white variety called April in Paris. I bet her fellow gardeners appreciate those, too.

As site coordinator, Aikens is responsible for more than her own plot. Inside the fence, she and her team keep the facility tidy and in working order. In February, she was in the tool shed, cleaning up the shared tools and tending the ornamentals she’s planted around the shed. The Amazon garden is one of six sites where the City of Eugene Community Gardens Program offers garden plots you can rent to grow your own food. The city provides plots, water and tools, and takes care of the secure perimeter fences and everything outside them. Site coordinator teams do the rest.

Eugene’s Community Gardens Program is operated by Parks and Open Space. One location, Skinner City Farm, has both individual plots and some larger ones for rent by organizations (all of them currently rented). Another site, at Alton Baker Park, has a number of raised beds for people with accessibility issues. Organic methods are “strongly encouraged” at all the city’s sites: Chemical fertilizers are permitted, but no pesticides or herbicides are allowed. Gardeners who held a plot use permit the previous year can renew the permits in January.

According to Parks Supervisor Chris Girard, this year’s renewal rate was about 75 percent, leaving 73 plots open — enough to satisfy demand this year, he reckons. Getting a plot at your preferred site, however, could be difficult. The Amazon site, which he describes as “a pretty tight community,” has only three vacancies this year, and the small garden at River House has one. Many more plots are available at Alton Baker Park (including four raised beds) and at the Matthews and Whiteaker sites.

There are several different kinds of community gardens in the Eugene area. FOOD for Lane County (FFLC) operates three professionally managed garden sites, where volunteers, local teenagers and students on field trips join the staff to raise organic produce for the hungry while acquiring gardening skills. Each garden has its special focus and character. At the Youth Farm in Springfield, limited-income teenagers learn about good nutrition and assist in running a 50-member community supported agriculture (CSA) and two farm stands, gaining skills in organic agriculture, marketing, teamwork and leadership. At two of the FFLC sites you can also rent a plot to grow your own food. Tools, camaraderie and gardening tips are provided. All three gardens are beautiful and great fun to visit.