



Karen Boyd, right, and Lesley Arnsdorf of the Canmore Community Garden Society check out the broccoli at the Canmore Community Garden near the hospital on Tuesday (Tuesday July 9).

MATTHEW THOMPSON RMO PHOTO

A growing community of gardeners in the Bow Valley

JORDAN SMALL

BOW VALLEY – Between cooler conditions and snowy weather, the growing season in the Bow Valley is short and sweet most years.

However, whether it's a green gardener digging their fingers into dewy soil for the first time or a graduated green thumb adding diversity to a garden, more people continue to glean the benefits of growing plants and vegetables.

"We hear quite regularly about the

physical and mental benefits of gardening and just being in the garden," said Karen Boyd, president of the Canmore Community Gardening Society. "The garden is just a beautiful place when everything is growing and everything is green and lush ... it's really hard to quantify or even describe until you've experienced it."

The Canmore Community Garden grew this year, adding more space near the hospital and the society expanded its membership from 90 communal gardeners to 120, with 25 additional

plot gardeners. Though the expansion was due to receiving a grant from the Graymont Carbon Reduction Fund, Boyd says she's seen more locals interested in getting their hands dirty and testing out how to sprout their own greens in recent years.

It's been happening around the valley, as well.

In 2021, the community of Dead Man's Flats opened a small, fenced-in community garden; while westward at Banff's three greenhouses, there's a high demand for one of the 80 available plots, especially during the pandemic years when gardeners had to sign up on a lengthy waitlist.

An intriguing hobby, having fresh food and produce on standby, and a mental health reliever are some reasons why gardening has seen growth locally.

The Canmore Public Library has even started a seed exchange pilot program that runs until July 31. It kind of works like a free library on the side of the street does: take some seeds, leave some seeds for others.

Library clerk Melissa Lambe said she thinks Canmore could benefit from it when it comes to the increased cost of groceries and having a little bit of extra food security. At the library, they've already seen success with the pilot, with many different people plucking through

the variety of seeds available.

"It's really interesting to see the diversity of people who are grabbing it," said Lambe.

"(...) People will come by like, 'oh, I can just take them?' like, yeah, absolutely. You can take as many as you want, which I think is another interesting point that we're doing. We're not capping the limit of any seeds that people can take. You can take as many as you want whenever you want, as long as they're there."

Growing in the Bow Valley

Banff, Canmore, Îyârhe (Stoney) Nakoda, the MD of Bighorn and Kananaskis Country are considered within the hardiness zone 3 range, while Lake Louise falls in the zone 2 category.

What that means for local gardeners is usually cooler temperatures prevail, but there are still plenty of vegetables that will easily grow in the communities.

The 2024 *Old Farmer's Almanac* has Banff's frost-free period from June 23 to Aug. 19 for a total of 56 days. In Lake Louise, it's listed for four days from July 14-19.

Boyd, who's an experienced gardener in the Bow Valley, said the outdoor growing period can vary from year-to-year but it's usually a 60- to 70-day window from July to September.

GROW

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“Our challenge is adapting,” said Boyd. “(...) We’re very mindful of how long it takes to grow the vegetables because being in the Bow Valley, if we have a late spring and an early fall, our growing window can be quite short.”

Whether it’s in the ground, a raised bed or in pots, some of the best seeds to stick in soil in the Bow Valley are for leafy plants, such as Swiss chard, arugula, lettuces, kale, early romaine, and spinach. Root vegetables like beets, radishes, potatoes and carrots also do well. For adding a little flavour to meals, herbs such as chives, basil, mint, dill and cilantro are great for zone 3. Other greens that are get the green light in zone 3 are beans, peas, zucchini, and squashes and many more.

Some plants are better suited to start indoors in the winter and spring months, such as tomatoes. It takes a little extra planning and a little extra indoor room to get things going, but a solid grow light/heat lamp system can help germination and get plants ready to go for when its time to relocate outdoors or in a greenhouse.

Fertilizers and compost also aid in a productive season.

Rules and regulations

In towns like Banff and Canmore, human and wildlife coexistence is taken seriously. So it’s easy to imagine that a garden full of veggies might be too delicious of a temptation for bears, deer and elk to pass on.

Backyard vegetable gardens are allowed in both mountain communities,

but there are rules and regulations to reduce or eliminate wildlife attractants, which include, but aren’t limited to fruit, garbage, refuse, food, food waste, and compost.

Whenever a bear, for example, comes into town and eats from a fruit tree or other wildlife attractant, it can become habituated to those food sources and if it continues coming back into town and over time it can become a danger to residents.

This can result in relocation and/or euthanization.

This is why an effort to remove fruit trees has been in full force.

But what about gardens?

“Vegetable gardens are allowed in Canmore, but need to be inaccessible to wildlife,” said Caitlin Miller, Canmore’s protective services manager, in an email. “A good example of this is the community gardens that we have in town that are well-fenced and it would be very hard for wildlife to access. The municipal enforcement department encourages community members who have food gardens to make sure they are well-fenced or in greenhouses.”

Greenhouses must be built in adherence to the regulations in the land use bylaw. If they are being self-built, they would also need a building permit where accessible.

In Banff, backyard greenhouses are also allowed, as long as it complies with the Town’s land use bylaw requirements.

Michael Hay, Banff’s manager of environment, said many residents grow their own vegetables in their backyard gardens, but generally speaking, it’s discouraged due to a community standard



Canmore Public Library clerk Melissa Lambe holds up some seed packages as part of the Seed Exchange pilot program. MATTHEW THOMPSON RMO PHOTO

bylaw that prohibits the accumulation of wildlife attractants.

“That’s so that we don’t attract bears into the townsite and it’s sort of the keystone of the Fruit Tree Replacement Program,” said Hay of the free incentive program. “We’re really, really strongly encouraging residents and businesses

to remove their fruit trees to get rid of those wildlife attractants, whether it’s crab apples or cherries or mountain ashes, things like that. That’s a big priority for us.”

With vigilance and common sense, many have and will continue to enjoy the fulfilling experience in “Grow Valley.”

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