

# Community Gardens in eThekweni Municipality in South Africa

The western parts of eThekweni Municipality<sup>1</sup> consists of large tracts of public land, which were zoned for various purposes, but could not be used or developed due to limited finances. In early 1998, the Inner West Council of eThekweni Municipality decided to make urban agriculture a function of the Parks and Recreation Department of the Municipality.

This Municipality is situated within the coastal belt on the south coast of South Africa, and is characterised by high rainfall and an undulating relief. Under the existing health by-laws of the municipality, public lands need to be cut and cleaned of rank grass and undergrowth on a regular basis. Most of

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such land is occupied by previously disadvantaged citizens (of South Africa). Traditionally, these people have been farmers, who now grow food for home consumption, and have been clearing these vacant sites and burning the vegetation found on these properties.

However, since most of these properties were located in the natural drainage lines of this area, it was necessary to ensure that trees and vegetation within the flood line were not removed. Legislation does not permit the removal of vegetation within the flood line. Unfortunately, due to lack of proper guidance or control, valuable trees, vegetation, and subsequently topsoil due to erosion has been lost. This situation called for re-establishing control and training on terracing and working on contours so as to retain the rainfall and prevent soil erosion.

After 1998, the Council permitted the use of the mentioned properties for



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community gardens, on the condition that the gardeners formed a proper organisation with a chairperson, and complied with the common gardening rules applicable to all gardens in the region. According to this arrangement the Council was required to give timely notice (six months) to the garden organisations and assistance to move to another place, if and when the given property was required for development.

The Council provided funding for the initial development of these gardens in the form of earthworks, fencing, water connection and a secure storage facility, and also undertook to provide compost once a year to each garden until they were self-sufficient in compost. The garden organisations also had to raise funds from their members to meet expenses. For instance, once the municipal water meter was installed the group had to control and pay for their own water use. Lockable taps and lockable tap covers were provided to control the consumption. There was also some financial support provided for fencing, initially, but due to the phenomenal growth of these gardens there wasn't sufficient to go around all the groups, and still there isn't sufficient funding for this activity. Fencing is essential as most of these gardens are situated close to the rural areas where cattle and goats as well as chickens are found grazing around. There is also the usual problem of theft that has to be prevented.

Training in the form of compost making,

mulching, and trenching is provided on each garden site, as each site has unique characteristics. This training is provided free of charge and combines current and traditional horticultural principles. A basic barter system is put in place and members swap surplus items amongst each other, to make up a balanced diet. It is also expected that the gardeners will in the future be able to make regular donations of foodstuffs to the local Aids shelters and hospices.

Such a set-up is believed to be a win-win situation for both the community and the Council. The Council provides better services with the money they otherwise would spend on clearing the vacant sites. They save money by having the grass cut on the pavements of the residential areas and delivered to the gardens for local compost making instead of having to truck this to far out refuse sites. The gardeners are able to work in close proximity to their homes, receive training and generate an income. A negative aspect affecting the growth of the gardens is the political interference of certain councillors who attempt to manipulate the people and the situation to meet their own needs.

At the time of writing, plans are being made to set up a community kitchen in each community hall within the different areas. It is proposed that items such as bottled spices and condiments and even jams will be made for sale. Also in the pipeline is the production of dried herbs that can be used for cooking food and for medicinal use by the local people. The plans for the preparation of traditional meals to be frozen and made available for sale to those who return home late from work are well advanced. Additional vacant areas have been identified for community gardens, like undeveloped sports grounds of schools. Applications have been made to the Education authorities to use these areas until such time they come up for development.

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup> This is the new name for Metropolitan Durban in South Africa

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