

WELLfed Garden, Porirua

AN OLD BOWLING GREEN IN CANNONS CREEK HAS A NEW LIFE AS A PRODUCTIVE COMMUNITY GARDEN AND LAST YEAR IT PRODUCED HUNDREDS OF KILOS OF FRESH FOOD FOR THE BENEFIT OF LOCAL PEOPLE.

STORY: JO MCCARROLL • PHOTOS: BRUCE MACKAY/STUFF

Just four years ago, this patch of land was a monocrop of grass growing in lifeless dirt, farm manager Jess Barnes says. But WELLfed, a free adult education programme to teach people to cook fresh healthy food, which had been running for several years at that point at various locations, was looking for a permanent home. The council offered a long-term lease of the disused bowling club, and now the old club building houses a teaching kitchen where the classes are held. "There are six classes a week, they are all free," Jess says. "People attend for six months, give and take. And they learn all sorts of skills, how to read a recipe, how to produce healthy meals on a small budget."

For the first couple of years after WELLfed moved here, the land was used as a composting site and a boutique market garden: leafy greens were produced and sold to local cafes. (Old bowling greens are often doused with a range of toxic chemicals, but soil tests were run before anything was planted and came back completely clear, Jess says.) But in 2021, WELLfed took ownership of the garden too and transformed it into a community space where food can be grown to be used in the cooking classes, and the local people get a chance to learn enough gardening skills that they can go on to grow food themselves at home.

There are some allotment-style beds in the garden. "Someone might have a bed here for six months," Jess says. "They get all the help they need. And that gives them the confidence they can grow at home."



"Food scraps from the kitchen are brought out into our compost bins, with the glorious rich compost adding fertility to the garden to grow more kai."

Kids from a local kindy visit every two weeks to learn more about plants and gardening, as do classes from several local schools. Regular workshops at the garden – based around container gardening, propagation, composting and more – share growing skills with local people, some of whom go on to volunteer at the regular Wednesday working bees and enjoy a share of the spray-free harvests of carrots, greens, spring onions, cauliflower, coriander, zucchini and more. "The garden produces a lot," Jess says. "It's not just about growing food, although we do a lot of that, it's about education, about community. It's a space where everyone is welcome."



The WELLfed garden team: (from left) Mathew Samuela, Jess Barnes and Kristi Whitworth-Chalk.