

A contentious piece of wasteland in Belfast has been transformed into a garden oasis, thanks to a spirit of cooperation, writes **Fionola Meredith**

WITH ITS ORDERLY rows of spinach, chard, beetroot and broad beans, the bees busy among the starry blue borage flowers, and the carefully staked sunflowers reaching for the sky, the community garden at the Waterworks Park in north Belfast is an unexpected piece of urban paradise. It's a world away from last month's scenes on the streets of inner east Belfast, left burnt and rubble-strewn following interface rioting.

But this area, too, has seen its share of sectarian trouble. The garden is built on a contested piece of ground, a former no-man's land between the loyalist Westland estate and Catholic communities on the other side of the interface. Standing here, among the peas and beans, the scent of lavender on the air, it's hard to imagine that not long ago petrol-bombs were being hurled over the 20ft-high metal peace wall that directly adjoins the carefully cultivated plot.

Stobhan Craig is the driving force behind the garden, now in its second season. Some years ago, she started a small charity called Grow, aiming to develop and support community gardens in contested spaces.

"I wanted people to experience the benefits of growing food, working outside with the soil while making friends and building a strong sense of community," she says.

In fact, it was Craig's straggly dog Rufus which sniffed out the location for the Grow garden, while out on a walk in the Waterworks Park. The strip of neglected waste ground, littered with debris, which formed a buffer zone between the two communities, didn't look promising. But Craig saw its potential.

"With some European peace funding and support from Belfast City Council, we now have two groups of north Belfast residents working the plot together on Fridays and Sundays. It has been a fantastic process and best of all, we now have a vibrant organic garden – which has not been vandalised – in an urban, working-class area."

"It's a great leveller, you get such a diverse group coming together, people of different nationalities, asylum seekers and refugees, gay people, straight people, Protestant and Roman Catholic," Craig says. "We encourage people to come who have been affected by the Troubles. It doesn't matter who you are. And it's as much about growing communities as it is about growing gardens. Once we have finished our planting and divvying up the jobs, we sit down and have a yarn about the area. It's a brilliant springboard for community action."

Refreshingly, there's nothing of the preaching do-gooder or evangelical eco-warrior about Craig. She's happy to get her hands dirty – mucking in where required, but not seeking to impose her way of doing things on participants. Community ownership is important: "It is their garden – we work with the people but it is their own thing."

There's no sense of exclusivity. Sweet peas have been planted to grow through the fence so



Making friends in the garden

that passers-by can easily pick a fragrant bunch, and any spare plants are left outside the gate for neighbours to help themselves. A spirit of generosity prevails. It's the opposite of the municipal "keep off the grass" approach.

Kimberley Morrison, who joined the team of volunteers last year, says that to her the garden is a "sacred space".

"When I saw the sign go up, I was instantly attracted to the idea – meeting the community, getting involved. We work together, garden together, reap the rewards together. I love the fact that it's multi-generational, people of all ages take part. It's a focus point for people in the area, and everyone is invited in."

At first, pensioner Lily Murphy was a little concerned that the work would be too physically demanding for her, but she was soon reassured: "You might be a bit sore when you go home on a Sunday afternoon, but it's a good kind of sore. I would have never pictured myself kneeling in the rain with the muck sticking to my trousers. I love it. You don't realise what you can do until you try it."

Participants who have experienced trauma in their lives have found the garden to be especially therapeutic. Lynda McBride lost her partner to suicide three years ago, and it was her psychiatrist that suggested she get involved with Grow. McBride has never looked back. "It has made a huge difference to me. It has turned my life around. Digging in the ground sounds very simple, but it gave me something to get up for in the morning."

One of the secrets to Grow's success has been the cheery presence of Justin Nicholl, the community gardener, who's always on hand to sus-

Kimberley Morrison, Joe Jago, Siobhan Craig, Lynda McBride and community gardener Justin Nicholl at the Grow

community allotment in north Belfast.

PHOTOGRAPH: CHARLES McQUILLAN/PACEMAKER

tain the project and co-ordinate the work. And Nicholl has brought another dimension to the garden: a passion for home-grown and home-cooked food. "We have a camp kitchen at the garden so we can cook at the drop of a hat, and we like to eat outside," he says. "It's all about getting people back in touch with where their food comes from."

Last week, there was a creamy potato, nasturtium and herb salad – "we grow the best spuds ever here and that's from a Donegal woman," Craig says. In spring they used wild garlic, foraged from Cave Hill, on bruschetta.

For Anna Wojciechowicz, who's originally from Poland, it's a way of reconnecting with her childhood. "At home in Poznan, my parents had an allotment, and the best vegetables came straight from the ground. I've missed that, but I've found it again at the garden. The place, the people: it's like an extension of my family."

Not all of Grow's activities are on-site: recently a group of volunteers set off to do some guerrilla gardening in Belfast city centre, planting wild strawberries, tomatoes, chard and peas in various spots around town, seed-bombing wasteland and making planters out of discarded election posters. The next plan is for a regular supper-club to be held at Craig's house nearby.

Back at the garden, Nicholl has just rustled up a tomato and herb soup. Everyone takes a seat at the big communal picnic table and tucks in. There's good home-made olive bread and cool unsalted butter. With the sun on your back, and birdsong in the air, it's easy to see how this interface garden works its simple healing magic.

For more information, see grow-ni.org