

Background

The Sustainable Living Initiative (SLI) is a not-for-profit social enterprise based in Norwich. It is registered as a “company limited by guarantee” with five directors and a secretary, none of whom receives any payment for their services to the organisation. With generous help from SLI members and a growing number of volunteers, the secretary manages the day-to-day operation of the organisation.

The Grow-Our-Own (GO²) scheme, a practical action project of the Sustainable Living Initiative, started in the autumn of 2004. Its main aim is to help people grow fruit and vegetables on the allotments. It does this by providing practical help and advice on what, when and how to grow - along with the supply of tools, seeds, plants and other support on a regular basis. By offering small, manageable sized plots, the scheme helps novice growers to overcome any fears they may have that only an experienced gardener can grow fruit and vegetables. This confidence-building exercise is key to the success of the scheme in attracting a large number of young growers with no previous experience of gardening.

GO² is not simply about growing fruit and vegetables. It is about sharing resources, helping each other and developing a sense of community.



Aims and objectives

We aim to promote a sustainable way of living through collective practical action. We believe that small-scale action, such as growing fruit, vegetables and herbs on allotments and in our own back gardens, recycling and reusing, avoiding car journeys and promoting a sense of community can have a far-reaching effect on natural, as well as on human environments.



Grow-Our-Own schemes

Grow-Your-Own

Under this scheme, a 10 rod (250 square metre plot) allotment is divided into mini plots (see below for details) of varying sizes depending on the needs and experience of individual growers. The rent includes tools, seeds, manure and hands-on practical advice. The plot holder is responsible for maintaining the plot and the path leading to the plot. We use organic practices wherever possible and the use of insecticide, pesticide and chemical fertiliser is not permitted.

Apart from growing fruit and vegetables, we promote self-help and collective action. So, 'old' growers are encouraged to help 'new' growers and everyone gives some time for group activities such as maintaining the facilities and communal areas. All growers are asked to sign an agreement form when joining the scheme.

Range of plot sizes

Small Plot – 1.20 X 6 metres: For absolute beginners with no experience of growing fruit and vegetables. This size plot is also suitable for a single person. Costs £17 per year (October, 2010-September, 2011).

To existing members, who have successfully completed their first year, up to 4 additional plots at £15 each per year may be available.

Young People's Plot – 1.2 X 1.2 metres: Starter plot for young people to gain some practical gardening experience. Cost £5 per year (October, 2010 –September, 2011).

Child's Plot – Small boxes, bath-tubs: For children to get some gardening experience while playing. Costs £2 per year (October, 2010 –September, 2011).

Wheelchair Accessible Plot – 1.2 X 1.2 metres: For wheelchair users or people with mobility difficulties. Costs £7 per year (October, 2010 –September, 2011).

Growing-at-Home Scheme

Practical help and advice for people who want to grow fruit and vegetables organically in their own gardens in the Norwich area. Members of the Growing-at-Home scheme also have the opportunity to come and meet the other growers on the allotment and learn from their experiences. The fee of £15 per year includes seeds and seedlings.

Volunteering

The volunteering scheme is aimed at those who are interested in gardening and growing but are unable to commit time on a regular basis. It provides an opportunity to learn gardening skills and get fresh produce from the allotment free of charge in return for help.



Profile of activities and achievements

This report covers the period from October 2009 to September 2010.

Despite increasing demand, we were unable to expand our scheme because of the lack of land. Norwich City Council will not assign any more allotments to us while they have a long waiting list. Undaunted, we looked at creating different ways of helping people to grow their own fruit and vegetables.

So we introduced a new scheme called Growing-at-Home (GAH) which offers advice, seeds and plants supplied from the GO² Centre to people for use in their own gardens. We also expanded our activities by starting a school gardening project in Thetford as part of the Thetford Healthy Living Initiative.

Details of our activities and achievements are discussed in the following sections.

Grow-Our-Own Scheme

During the past six years, GO² has evolved from 'one-size plot' for adults to 'plots for everyone'. As a result, we now have plots for children, young people, adults and people with disabilities.

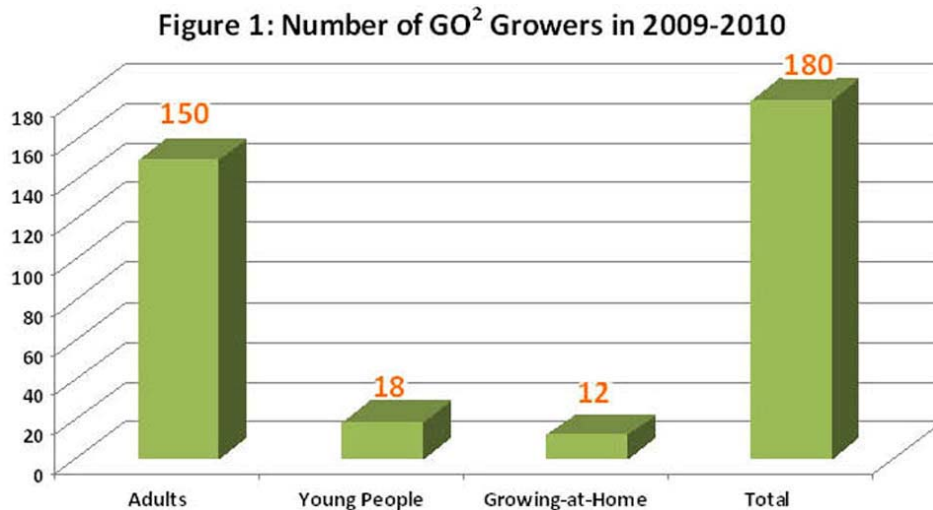


Figure 1 shows the number of GO² growers in 2009-2010. While the total number of growers on our allotments will remain more or less the same from now on as there are no more plots available, the number of GAH members may continue to rise in the years to come.

Of the 180 growers, 19 left during the year. Nearly half of them left due to ill health or changes in their circumstances, such as moving house. Four growers who failed to look after their plots, despite repeated warnings, were asked to leave the scheme.

Figure 2: Number of GO² Growers by Gender



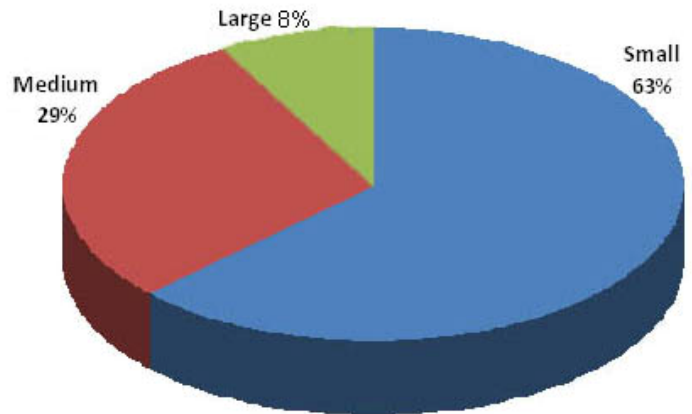
Figure 2 shows that almost two-thirds of the growers were female.

Distribution of growers by plot size

As in previous years, the majority of the growers (63%) had only one strip measuring 6 x 1.2 metres; only 8% of the total 126 adult growers had a large size plot, which is about a third of the standard size allotment plot (see Figure 3).

These results confirm our view that the “new generation” of allotment enthusiasts are quite happy with the small strip of land. In fact, many of our growers joined the GO² scheme precisely because the size of our plots is manageable. These results also offer valuable lessons to local authorities and community groups involved in promoting allotments.

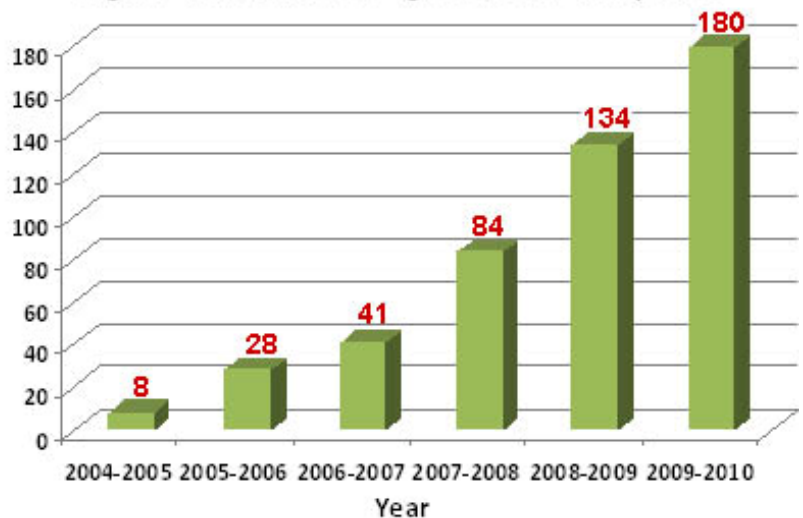
Figure 3: Adult Growers and Plot Size



Six years of GO²

The GO² scheme has grown over 20 fold in six years (see figure 4). This has been made possible by the increasing popularity of the scheme among its members. Some of our members have been with the GO² scheme for more than 3 years. These graduate members not only volunteer to take responsibility for the management of the group but also work as ambassadors of the scheme. As a result, seven out of ten new growers who joined the scheme during the year had heard about us through their friends.

Figure 4: How has GO² grown over the years?



Volunteering

The number of regular volunteers who are also GO² members is growing rapidly. In fact, this is the sort of co-operation that has helped make the work of Sustainable Living Initiative truly sustainable.

We also have volunteers who do not have a plot but come and help us occasionally. In most cases they end up as regulars.

Growing-at-Home Scheme

Following an advert in the Citizen magazine in Spring 2010, twelve growers from Norwich joined the scheme. The response so far is encouraging and we hope more people will join the GAH scheme in the years to come.



Growers Stories

Our first year of Growing Our Own From Nat and Phil



Starting in the cold wet spring with bare earth and weeds
Meeting increasing numbers of new people as the weather warmed
Worrying about irrigation in the hot early summer...

...and water logging in the rainy school holidays

Finding people willing to share:

- Plants
- Produce
- Watering
- Advice

Harvesting more than we could carry; sometimes nothing

Never knowing what to expect week to week

Already planning for next year in the autumn

Tucking in the soil under a bubble wrap blanket for winter

Nothing quite like the Growing of Our Own:

- Garden
- Food
- Selves
- Community

An excellent first year's gardening, look forward to an even better second year in 2011!

A Summer of Growing at Home : Tish's Story

"Back in March this year I moved into a flat with a front garden overgrown with bindweed, brambles and stinging nettles. My plan was to grow my own organic vegetables, but I also wanted to make a garden that looked and smelled good, would be a relaxing place for me to sit and read and have space for my grandchildren to play. While this presented a challenge I welcomed, it was also somewhat daunting.

Then I saw a paragraph in *The Citizen* about Grow Our Own, with a mention of Growing-at-Home, so I rang Mahesh, who invited me along to the allotment. It happened to be a Volunteers Day, and what I found almost made me wish that I didn't have my own garden at home. I loved the busy, happy, friendly, supportive atmosphere, with the sharing of seeds, plants, tools and knowledge - and I wanted to be part of it.

Seven months later, I feel that I've got the best of both worlds. I was eating my own fruit and vegetables all summer, my success very much helped by the organic seeds and plants I got from the allotment, and advice freely offered by committee and members face-to-face and on the website. I've made new friends (and caught up with someone who recognised me from working together in King's Lynn 45 years ago).

Although my gardening is done at home, I feel part of the community through joining in some of the activities. I've enjoyed feasts of home grown food at the monthly food share, had a laugh at the allotment Open Day in spite of the rain, and learnt how to preserve produce for the winter in small, friendly groups.

The project has prevented me from feeling isolated in my own garden, but I would like to suggest a scheme for sharing our ideas with other Growing-at-Home members. I love mooching round gardens and I'd be fascinated to see what other members are doing. I don't know if any other members feel the same? Would anyone be interested in the idea of inviting each other round to view our gardens sometime next summer?" *by Tish Kerkham*

Reports

Seed Saving and Composting (by Peter Anderson)

The seed saving scheme with the Garden Organic Heritage Seed Library has produced some promising results. We had enough French climbing beans - Bridgewater, a compact pea – Poppet, a long beetroot, and Bath Cos lettuce seeds for our members. Moreover, the French climbing bean, Bridgewater, has been a big success and we now have a good supply of seed for the coming year as well.

During 2009-2010, parsnip and asparagus kale seed have been grown, harvested and cleaned and varieties of pea (Poppet) and broad bean (Mr Jones) have also been saved for bulking. A tasty white carrot was successfully grown and, hopefully stored, to be harvested in its second year. There was trouble this year with a long-rooted version of beetroot which may have cross-fertilized with the more usual round variety. In future we shall concentrate on seed that is easy to grow on without the danger of cross-pollination.

SLI hosted an informal group of seed savers for a second seed swap at the Centre and another is likely to be held during 2011.

Composting

There were continued frustrations with composting material from growers' plots. Notices and requests were largely ignored and, as a result, large heaps of mixed (welcome) vegetable green waste and unwanted perennial plants (such as couch grass, docks etc) and (uncut) slow-to-rot woody stems (e.g., *brassica* stems, fruit bush cuttings, sticks, sunflower stems) built up. A new way of composting has now been started: bins have been placed around the site for members to make their own compost. Large compost sites have been tidied up and covered and these should work faster and better. Bin bags are also available for each grower, or small group, to use for storing noxious weed roots.

We are now expecting that more and better compost will be made throughout the plots, probably one of the most important things we can do as organic gardeners. Our sandy soil needs constant topping up with compost/manure, either as a soil improver, a mulch or to improve water retention.

Peter Anderson, who has been working on the site near the entrance to act as an exemplar of composting, has given up this role after damaging a shoulder. Claire, Natasha, Phil and Helene will be helping with the management of this composting area.



Peter Anderson and Helene Rinaldo at the 2010 Open Day

Food-Sharing Day and Food Preservation (by Bridget Beauchamp)

Food-sharing Sundays, when growers bring a dish made, if possible, from allotment produce, have continued. As ever, people come up with new ways of cooking courgettes or pumpkin or whatever is abundant at the time so there is much tasting and swapping of recipes. Some of these have found their way onto the website and it is hoped to add to the collection next year. Numbers of people coming to the events, which happen on the first Sunday of each month, have been growing.

The December event, with a tombola and sale of books, jam and chutney in addition to the lunch, filled the Centre to bursting point despite the freezing temperature. Clive's savoury flapjack was a star dish, though he admits that rosemary was the only ingredient from the allotment.

Jam-making workshops, started last year, made good use of the annual glut of plums and greengages. There were also workshops making chutney, cucumber pickles and spiced elderberry cordial and for bottling fruit. The workshops serve two purposes; to demonstrate the basics of preserving produce, and to replenish our stock of jars of preserves on sale in the Centre. And, once summer ended and the mint for mint tea died down, elderberry cordial, diluted with hot water, became the drink of choice on cold mornings at the allotment.

What the growers say: results of a Growers' Survey (by Claire Pinkney)

I have been part of the group for several growing seasons now and have watched the scheme change and develop during that time. This led me to suggest that we conduct a survey of members.

With approval from SLI Directors, I published a questionnaire through our Google Groups page and also made paper copies available at The Centre. Having no experience of writing survey questionnaires, I based it upon common-sense questions and areas which would hopefully identify any common thoughts and habits among fellow growers.

Twenty responses were returned out of a possible 180 members. Whilst this does not represent a large enough percentage to draw any firm conclusions it was a valuable insight which, as hoped, did indicate some like-minded thinking.

More than half of the responses received were from members who have been part of the group for more than two years and whilst nobody was able to visit their plot daily (despite ideally wanting to!) the majority did visit at least 2-3 times a week during the peak growing season - this appears to be regardless of their plot size.

It was also great to see that walking, cycling and taking buses are the most popular options for getting to the site. It has always been the intention of the group to promote the minimal use of cars, so is good to see this reflected in the survey.

These are some of the reasons given for joining the scheme:

- Meditation and outdoor pleasure
- Access to garden (live in a flat)
- Manageable size of plot, tools etc provided on site
- Wanted to grow own veg.
- Environmental reasons, food miles etc.
- Save money on food
- Interest in organics
- Community building
- Support good project

An awareness of seasonal and local produce is a theme throughout the comments in response to “How has the scheme changed your shopping & eating habits?” As is the need to spend less money and to be more inventive when cooking.

When asked what improvements could be made to the scheme comments covered a broad range of ideas, including:

- Composting - a second area by the 'red shed' needed
- Notice board - needs to be bigger as people are obviously not reading the info about what to plant/harvest!
- Keep tighter control on plots - abandoned weed covered plots make things difficult for adjoining people when things seed.
- More evening opening times for those that work 9-5 in the in the summer.
- The water shortage this summer highlighted the problem of watering when plants needed it most and water pressure was low or nil. How to address this?
- Make it clearer about what group tasks need to be done.

There were some concerns about the scheme being too big, resulting in the volunteering and sharing of resources ethos not being in the forefront of every member's mind.

But, it was heartening to see that no respondents expressed any need for change.

The survey comments have made me realise that we are incredibly lucky to have such resources and especially the availability of a plot provided with such enthusiasm and trust – after 2yrs on the allotment waiting list, I know I'll continue to be a proud member of the scheme who will find the time to turn up on a few more volunteer Sundays!

Thank you to everyone who took a moment to complete the survey and indulge my curiosity! The comments will be looked at by the directors and addressed throughout the coming season.



Open Day 2010



Thetford School Gardening Project

As part of the Thetford Healthy Eating Town project, Norfolk Rural Community Council (NRCC) asked SLI to set up school allotments on two sites in Thetford. The work started in January last year and will continue in 2011, subject to the availability of funding. The students (and the teaching staff) enjoyed harvesting good crops of broad beans, early potatoes, squashes and pumpkins, sweet corn and raspberries.

We hope these successes will attract more pupils to the gardening club next year.

Volunteering Day

Apart from improving the facilities on the allotment, the main purpose of the volunteering day is to bring growers and members together, share gardening ideas and experiences and develop a sense of community. Our volunteering day is on the last Sunday of each month when members and growers engage in a range of communal activities from clearing plots to making paths, painting the shed, and making compost heaps.

During the year 2009-10, we introduced a task-based system of volunteering for those members who are unable to come on the volunteering day. The idea was to allocate a particular task to a group of growers who could come whenever they had spare time to do it. After a year-long trial of this new idea, we are going back to the old system as per the demand of our members.

The monthly volunteering day has become an indispensable tool not only in maintaining the services and facilities on the allotment but also in promoting teamwork among growers. There is a handful of growers who never take part in any of the volunteering activities. Instead of proposing punitive actions against those members, we hope that they will, one day, offer helping hands.

Events

We organise a Food Event and Open Day once a year and a Volunteering Day and Food-Sharing day once a month. The main objective of these events is to bring people together and promote a sense of community by helping each other with tasks and sharing good food and recipes.

Food Event

This event is mainly for SLI members, regular volunteers and well-wishers. It is normally held on the first day of the summer school holiday in Mahesh's back garden.

This year's food event was attended by over 35 people. The good weather, barbeque and the plenty of good food from the allotment made the event a real success.

Open Day

This year's Open Day took place on Saturday 25th September. Despite the rain, the turnout was very good. Forty-five GO² members volunteered to help, which made the day a great success. We sold home-made jams, chutneys and fresh produce from the allotments.

There was a refreshment tent with a wide selection of home-made cakes, freshly squeezed apple and pear juice and homemade lemonades. We ran a garden quiz, a tombola and an information desk. This year there was a special composting demonstration (see picture on page 7).

One of the highlights was the singing by Sian and her friends.



Finance

As a result of the rapid increase in the number of growers including home growers, our rental income has gone up significantly compared to previous years (see the table). Apart from a donation from Waitrose Community Matters and a small donation from the Educational Centres Association, the income from plot rents, the Open day and the sale of produce was enough to cover our ongoing expenses during 2009-2010.

The major items of expenditure were for city council plot rents, seeds, tools and plot improvements. We have also started paying for a gardening assistant on a part-time basis.

The unusually high expenditure on stationery (£511.0) during 2009-10 is due the high cost of replacing laser printer cartridges which had not been done for five years.

Income and expenditure account detail for the year to 30th September 2010 (Comparatives for the year ended 30th September 2009)

(Draft figures subject to account adjustments)

	2010	2009
	£	£
<u>Income</u>		
Sales income:	886	805
Produce Sales including Open Day	663	602
Plant Sales	0	106
Miscellaneous Sales	223	97
Recurring income:	3594	3,080
Plot rent	3559	2,934
Members fees and related income	35	146
Other income:	7242	5,250
Donations	683	255
Grants	0	4,992
Interest	0	3
Thetford School Project	6559	0
TOTAL INCOME	11722	9,135
<u>Expenditure</u>		
Direct expenditure:	3158	3,240
Plot rent	599	593
Seeds	767	776
Manure	203	329
Labour	384	0
Repairs	51	196
Small Tools	492	473
Plot improvements	662	873
Investment in equipment & facilities:	0	4992
Solar light and water butts	0	0
Greenhouse Repairs	0	406
Disabled access improvements	0	4024
Tools	0	303
Other Direct Expenditure	0	259
Overhead expenditure:	7813	1,397
Telephone & broadband	343	359
Postage	8	20
Stationery	511	98
Insurance	522	432
Training	334	44
Subscriptions	154	121
Sundries	94	323
Professional fees	0	0
Travel	43	0
Thetford School Project	5804	0
Taxation:	0	0
Corporation tax payable on result for period	0	0
TOTAL EXPENDITURE	10971	9,629

Our Future Plan

In recent years, “grow your own” has become increasingly popular and a number of initiatives have started across many cities, towns and villages. However, what makes GO² special is our emphasis on sharing resources, helping each other and promoting a sense of community through collective action. Hence, grow ‘our’ own.

We want to build on this success by working with schools, community groups and families to start new grow-our-own projects in other areas of Norwich and beyond. To do this we need more space than we currently have at Bluebell South Allotments.

What we are looking for is a piece of land to set up a Community Garden Centre. This would include a community garden-cum-picnic area and a purpose-built eco-office for training and workshops on fruit and vegetable growing, cooking and preserving. The Centre’s kitchen garden and orchard would work as a demonstration plot for people to learn about basic gardening skills. Depending on the availability of land, we would like to have allotments and pick-your-own area as well. Please get in touch with us if you know of any suitable locations in or close to Norwich.

Services we offer

Growing at home

If you would like to grow fruit and vegetables in your own back garden, but are unsure how to go about it, we are happy to help you.

A day out?

We welcome visits from schools, youth groups, clubs and individuals. We are open on Wednesdays and Sundays from 10 until 1. You can visit our plant nursery to learn about growing from seeds, meet a specialist composter to discover the magic of composting, and visit the environmentally friendly composting toilet. You will also have the opportunity to see how fruit and vegetables are grown.

Volunteering opportunities

If you like the idea of growing your own, but cannot make a regular commitment, you can help others in return for free produce. This way you can learn basic gardening skills, meet people and get local organic produce.

Allotments

We offer small, easy-to-manage plots, practical help and advice on what to grow, when to grow it and how to get seeds, plants and compost. We will also tell you when to harvest your produce, and suggest recipes and tips for storing surplus produce for use in the future.

Help and advice to schools/community groups to set up similar projects

We are currently working in two schools in Thetford, helping school children to set up and maintain allotments. If you are a school or community group interested in starting your own growing scheme, we would be happy to offer you our experience and expertise.