

Avonmouth's Secret Garden



Local Men's Shed volunteers get to work building planting boxes (image taken before lockdown).

A disused piece of railway land at a railway station outside Bristol has become a haven of locally grown produce thanks to the efforts of the local CRP, a community food growing movement, and volunteers. The Secret Garden, tucked away in a disused compound on Platform 1 at Avonmouth station was brought to life in 2019 through a collaboration between Incredible Edible Bristol, the Severnside Community Rail Partnership and the people of Avonmouth.

Supported by the GWR Customers and Communities Improvement Fund, the muscle to clear the land, build planters and garden furniture and stock and maintain raised beds came from volunteers from Network Rail, GWR apprentices and the Community Payback Service under the guidance and expertise of the Incredible Edible team.

The initial year-long volunteer programme enabled those involved to immerse themselves into the heart of the community and together they learned about barriers to local people accessing fresh food and maintaining a healthy diet. With signposting and support from the local community centre, GP Surgery and NHS Community Navigator, a series of learning sessions have been delivered, specially designed to empower people living in this North Bristol community to grow their own produce. In the longer term, it is hoped this will reduce the number of households facing severe food insecurity and finding themselves in a situation where they need to be referred to food bank charities.

Since Covid-19 lockdown began in March, the UK has seen an unprecedented demand in people needing to access emergency food supplies, with five new foodbanks having since opened up in Bristol alone.

Sara Venn, Founder of Incredible Bristol explained, "The aim of the Secret Garden at Avonmouth has always been to promote growing as a way to increase community resilience, through growing and creating opportunities for skill sharing and community-based learning. So far, the project has engaged with a wide range of both the Avonmouth and rail communities, and we hope to be able to continue that work as we move forwards, and to become an important part of the campaign to build back better in a post Covid-19 world."

Of course, we are not in that world as yet, so as we work through the year, our focus right now is to ensure there is a source of fresh, well grown, local vegetables, to support people who have been made vulnerable by the virus, and for whom food has become a struggle. Avonmouth is identified as one of Bristol's most at risk areas of food insecurity, with the closest supermarkets being either a car, bus, or train journey away. With public transport being advised against and a huge increase in the numbers of people needing to access online deliveries, the Secret Garden has become an important source of food for those relying on community help in buying shopping. The food produced so far has gone into shopping bags, and into community meals and will continue to do so throughout the summer and into autumn."

"Now we are planning for how we move out of the Covid-19 world, and support people in their new normal. With online sales of seed rocketing and compost sales increasing by 1300% during March and April, we aim to move our learning online, creating small videos and learning opportunities for people, and ensuring that everyone feels that they can grow and cook food, increasing personal resilience, whether they have access to a garden, a balcony or just a windowsill".

Plans are also afoot to provide growing packs for primary school children along the Severn Beach Line, that will be distributed with instructions of how to grow the enclosed seeds, ensuring that they can be used by everyone regardless of outdoor space.