

Runners up

GARDENERS: Growing Together
LOCATION: Bingley, West Yorkshire



Eighteen months ago, sixteen blind and partially-sighted people-and two “blind” dogs-took over a derelict plot of land adjoining the Resource Centre in a built-up area in inner-city Bradford. For ten years the land had been neglected, overgrown with tough weeds and used as a junk yard. But with hope in their hearts and the practical support of knowledgeable volunteers, this group formed the Growing Together Gardening Club.

“Growing Together” was wisely and symbolically chosen as a title because the Club not only intended to grow vegetables and flowers, but also to weld together its mixed membership of ages and backgrounds, sharing old skills and learning new ones-together. There was also an unspoken awareness that visual impairment could cause psychological reactions, perhaps of anger and resentment, loneliness, even depression. So Growing Together set out to solve a variety of problems, creating new-found confidence and self-assurance through gardening.

Additionally, it would regenerate the area, with an impact on surrounding streets, so great that there are now thankfully and relieved comments from local shopkeepers.

So, tediously and laboriously the rubbish was finally cleared, and easy-access raised beds prepared for seeds and plants.

Slow progress, hard physical work, and immense mental effort in telling-without sight-a weed from a wallflower.

Physical problems became immediately apparent-tripping over hose pipes, identifying seed packets, understanding safety instructions, storing of tools properly. If members put down a trowel or fork, they sometimes couldn't find it again: maybe one of the dogs had sat on it. So aprons with large pockets will soon be uniform. But it was water which became a hilarious problem: since no water tap is yet available, the fire hydrant is unofficially used to supply hoses and fill cans. There is a great deal of laughter as members get indiscriminately squirted, going home satisfyingly wet as well as dirty and dishevelled.

In the first full Summer of planting and harvesting they have grown a wide range of vegetables including lettuces, peas and mange touts in drain pipes, leeks, onions and rosy garlic, potatoes, courgettes and herbs, even a few strawberries. They taste them all, even unfamiliar nasturtiums. Flowers flourish too, unseen but well-tended, among their vegetables- and members go home with bunches of cosmos or sweet peas and baby tomatoes in little pots. They have an incipient herbaceous border now, nurturing the cutting they learned to take in a special workshop starting small shoots off in chunks of well-soaked oasis.

The Club is becoming an accepted part of society in a run-down part of Bradford, having a public open day and visitations from fascinated observers who recognise that a rather doubtful experiment to enable visually-impaired people to create a garden has now become a purposeful reality. One reporter perceptively remarked: "I wouldn't have guessed that this garden had been done by visually-impaired people- and in such a short time" The secret? Growing together.