

# Onigum Community Garden attracts interest of village children

by Gail DeBoer  
Staff writer  
gdeboer@pilotindependent.com

According to Onigum resident and Master Gardener Polly Bedeau, Onigum has a deep history of community working together for food. Families would gather together and make camps for harvesting deer, wild rice, fishing, berry picking, and tapping maples. Natural foods were gathered from the forests, the greatest garden of all.

For many years there was a small community garden behind the old community center where soil was fairly good and water was accessible. Each year a small group volunteered to work the garden, including many children from the community and summer programs.

In the early 1990's, a large, successful garden project was supported by the Cass County/Leech Lake Reservation Chil-

dren's Initiative. Unfortunately, the effort could not sustain itself when the funding ran out.

When a new community center was built, the garden was relocated to the west side of the new facility. About 1,500 square feet was designated and a water source was available. In 2016, garden supplies, fencing materials and a shed were donated to the garden project. In 2017, the Onigum Local Indian Council purchased a tiller. When the tiller broke down, work continued by hand.

The Leech Lake Band of Ojibwe's SHIP program helped greatly, with the 2021 garden season purchasing seeds, plants and other gardening supplies. Many plants were donated as well from a local garden center.

"It was very labor intensive to break the compacted ground," says Bedeau, who leads Onigum's community



The Onigum Community Garden is located west of the new Community Center. Garden supplies, fencing materials and a shed were donated to the project and water is available on site. Photos submitted



Tomatoes and cucumbers harvested last summer are cradled in the hands of children from the Onigum Boys' and Girls' Club.

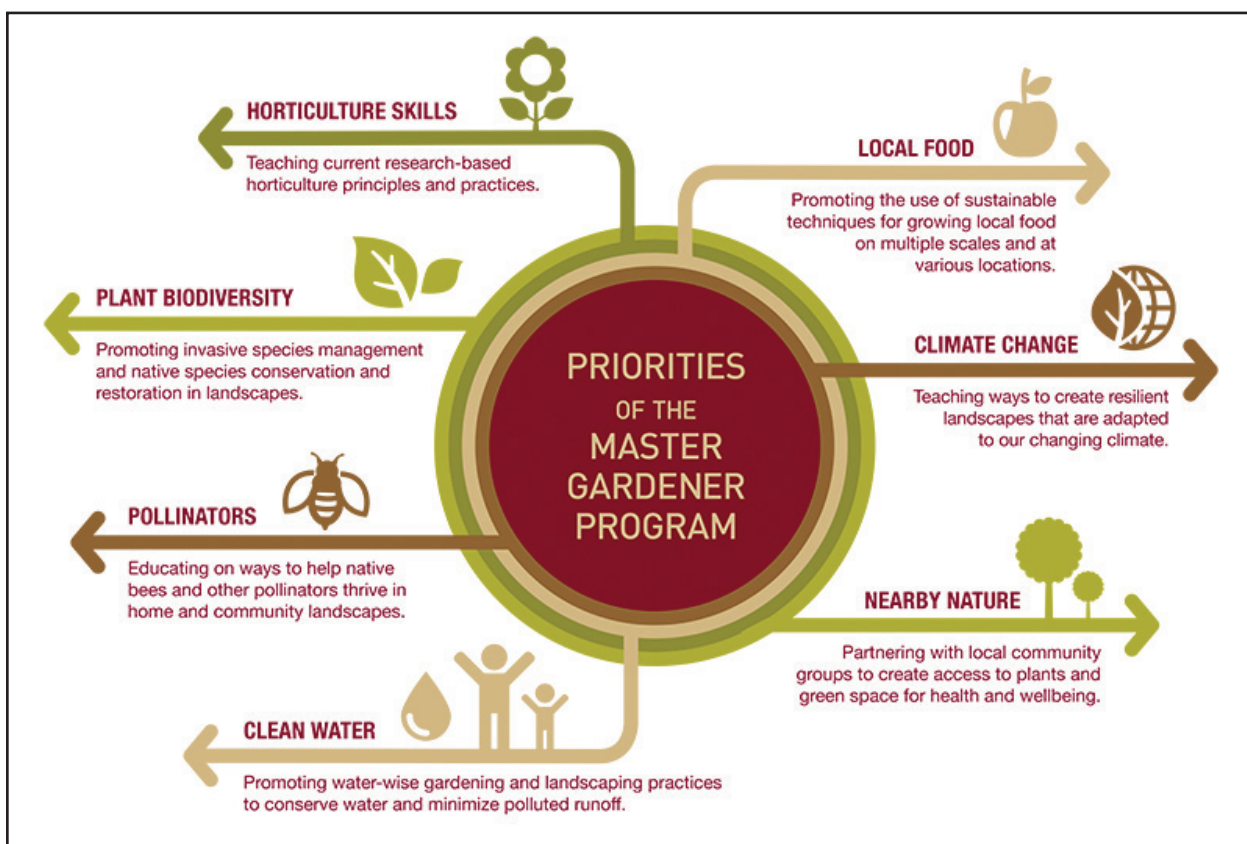
garden effort.

The garden has attracted the interest of village children. "Kids would stop by almost every day to see if they could help," she reports. "They learned how to plant strawberries, corn and beans. They learned how butterflies help gardens by pollinating flowers and how the monarch butterfly migrates and returns here to seek out the showy milkweed plants to lay their eggs and feed upon."

The kids insisted that all the milkweed plants in the garden should remain there for the butterflies. "We worked around each of the milkweed plants and had a wonderful pollinator garden amidst the other plants. It was very exciting when the kids observed the



The Onigum Garden is right next door to the Onigum Community Center and is open to all local Gardeners and children who want to learn about gardening. This garden was resurrected in 2021 by Master Gardener Polly Bedeau (pictured with village children), an Onigum resident and avid gardener. Contact Polly if you are interested in gardening there at (218) 536-1010.



## Pine River-Backus Community Garden plots available

The Pine River-Backus Community Garden, located behind the high school near the school forest, is open for signing up for plots and/or raised beds.

All the plots and raised beds are in full sun and the area is fully fenced to protect from deer and other critters. There are 53 plots 15'x15' (\$15), a few raised beds 4'x8'x3' (\$10), and about 10 raised garden circles of various sizes (\$10) available. There is also the option of offering "sweat equity" (labor) in exchange for a plot/raised bed where the gardener can work with group projects in the garden as the fee. Sign up for the plots is through PRB Community Education at <https://prbschools.org/community-ed/> or call 218-587-2080.

A garden orientation session is scheduled for May 14 from 9 to 11 a.m. at the garden site. Gardeners already registered are expected to participate and those still considering a plot rental are welcome to come and see the options for this great gardening option with many amenities for ease of gardening. Those still unsure of gardening, can visit with past gardeners to learn more. New gardeners may register on-site that day.

There are guidelines to follow, using organic or natural gardening methods (no chemical fertilizers) and strong encouragement to operate using no-till gardening method in order to build healthy soil with active microbiome. Each gardener signs an agreement agreeing to follow these guidelines.

There will be on-site educational garden classes and a few work days through the season for communal projects to keep the gardens functioning well and addressing common needs/concerns. If you are new to gardening, renting a plot is a great way to begin with learning from other gardeners and participating in the classes offered. Learning is ongoing for all gardeners and takes place as you work your own plot(s).

Many resources are available on site that make gardening as easy as possible. The entire garden area, 175-by-140 feet, is fenced in and there are three main water lines with easy access to all plots and good water pressure available.

Fees go towards composted manure; natural soil amendments; straw for mulch; garden tools; soil testing; and a compost pile is nearby as well.

There is also a hoop house (20-by-24 feet) on site that has been used for season-extended growing projects but usage this year has yet to be determined.

This spring, thanks to a grant from Cass County SHIP (Statewide Health Improvement Program), the water lines will be extended into the garden to facilitate watering the plots more easily without the need to drag hoses through the entire area to reach individual plots. Last fall a group of volunteers worked to clear all the debris, haul in topsoil for all the plots, and recreate pathways with cardboard and mulch throughout the garden area to spiff it up. It will be ready for planting as soon as the soil is work-able.

The Community Garden was started in 2010 and is 12 years old this year. It is organized through PRB Community Education with a Board of volunteers to oversee and manage the particulars. The Board is seeking new members to serve and typically meets once a month March through September. Call Troy Gregory, PRB Community Ed Director at (218) 587-2080 to indicate interest or for more information.

baby monarch caterpillars and how they ate the milkweed leaves, grew, developed into a chrysalis and emerged into new butterflies."

The Onigum Boys' and Girls' Club kids also helped in the garden and learned many things, too. They were fascinated by smells and flavors of the herb garden, the 'pizza' plant (savory), lemon balm, sage, peppermint and marjoram, to name a few.

"Kids in the garden is so much fun and a great way to spend time with each other," Polly remarks.

At harvest time, people picked and learned how to dry herbs for cooking. There also were squash, onions, tomatoes, cucumbers and other vegetables to try. Since it was the first year for strawberries, only a lucky few got to taste them.

Plans for the 2022 season include:

- Planting a self-sustaining "Three Sisters Garden." The seeds were developed, saved and generously donated by Kathleen Connell. They will be planted for corn that can be ground into flour, beans that can be dried and squash that can be

stored easily, all of which can be used throughout the winter. Seeds will be saved for next year's garden.

- Kathleen Connell will be coming to Onigum in April to share her knowledge and experience to help us learn to plant the Three Sisters Garden in our community garden.

- "Broadfork" and "no-till" gardening methods will be incorporated to build natural soil structure and maintain soil health.

- We will focus on composting.

- Filling two raised bed gardens with flowers and other goodies

- Developing an Onigum Community Garden facebook page to share garden news and resources

"A little hard work feels good, especially when the job is done," Polly reflects. "Seeing the garden grow is so rewarding and the end result is wonderful."

Anyone who wants to help with the Onigum Community Garden should contact Polly at (218) 536-1010 or pollybedeau1@arvig.net.

Next week: Hackensack and Backus Community Gardens

