

FALL 2025 \$4.95

CAPE ANN



Bruce Shaw, a volunteer with Cummings Foundation, and Alison DiFiore, executive director of Backyard Growers, chat about how grant money has benefited community gardens like this one at Burnham's Field in Gloucester.



A growing endeavor

Fresh food program thrives with help of grant and dedicated people

By late summer, the Backyard Growers' raised gardens here at Burnham's Field will be flourishing.

Urban gardeners, given a hand up by the growers group, will have already picked and eaten lettuce, peas, onions, strawberries, and other vegetables and fruits.

The gardeners will be eager for more, for the corn, tomatoes and squash continuing to come, and they will take pleasure in nurturing the plants' growth in these downtown Gloucester beds.

It's gratifying for cub gardeners, seeing their produce sprung from seed and compost, water and sun, and agricultural knowledge.

Also for veteran growers, and to see varieties less familiar to New England take root and produce.

On this warm afternoon in late April, the raised beds are filled, neat and full of promise.

Three of the people who make that promise possible gather in the sun and reflect on the homegrown project that cultivates health and well-being through food and education.

Among the three people is Bruce Shaw, an Essex resident and retired independent school teacher and administrator.

For the past five years, he has volunteered for Cummings

Planting good habits

Backyard Growers offers garden program consulting services for schools and districts across New England.

In Gloucester, 100% of public school students from prekindergarten through eighth grade participate in school garden programming.

Preschool and elementary kids plant and harvest fresh produce that is then served to them through monthly taste tests. Middle schoolers grow and pop their own corn and plant and harvest wheat that they thresh, winnow, mill and make bread with. School garden soil health units also tap into science and social studies curricula.

For more information, visit backyardgrowers.org/school-programs.

By TERRY DATE • *Photos by* DAVID SOKOL



Backyard Growers supports 56 garden beds at Burnham's Field that are available to Gloucester residents.

Foundation, which awards grants to non-profits that help people live and thrive.

On Cape Ann, the foundation has awarded more than \$3.2 million to non-profits since its grant program began in 2012.

Shaw visits grant recipients and forges relationships with them, one of which is Backyard Growers, awarded a 10-year \$250,000 Cummings Foundation grant in 2012.

The Gloucester nonprofit connects people, especially kids, with local food. The organization provides the tools and know-how to grow and eat healthy and satisfying food.

It's grown in hundreds of handmade raised beds, including those here in the park, and five other community gardens along with those in the yards of hundreds of Gloucester homes and in schoolyards.

Digging in

Each year, some 2,000 Gloucester students take part in school gardening projects through Backyard Growers programs with Meg Tenczar.

Every student spends 90 minutes in their school gardens learning to reap and

Local recipients

Cape Ann nonprofits that have received grants from Cummings Foundation include:

GLOUCESTER

Backyard Growers Inc., \$479,000
 Gloucester Marine Genomics Institute, \$102,000
 Gloucester Public School District, \$100,000
 Maritime Gloucester, \$122,000
 North Shore Health Project, \$225,000
 Pathways for Children Inc., \$457,000
 SeniorCare Inc., \$388,000
 The Open Door/Cape Ann Food Pantry Inc., \$703,000
 Wellspring House Inc., \$563,333

ROCKPORT

CCB Foundation, \$119,625

MANCHESTER-BY-THE-SEA

Family Health Project, \$75,000

DiFiore, and its development director, Katy Marques.

Both of them are here in the park, at the end of Sargent Street.

Three weeks ago, in early April, Shaw was on a site visit while the 350 students at West Parish Elementary School came out, class by class, to plant lettuce and peas.

In the course of the spring day, New England weather lived up to its reputation for variability.

Shaw says that it threw wind, rain, snow and sleet at the project, but the kids were undaunted and relished the planting.

Tenczar posed questions and described situations that captured the youths' imaginations.

"The kids who were already leaning in, kept leaning and leaning and (learning)," Shaw recalls.

Over time, year to year, engaged in the school gardening programs, students not only understand where food comes from, and get experiential moments during the school day, but they also become more likely to try to eat produce, DiFiore says.

"It becomes the water they swim in," she says of the kids and their connection to growing food.

sow, asking questions and — at different points in the year — eating food harvested from local gardens.

More than 20,000 students throughout Massachusetts are learning about food and gardening from Backyard Growers, says the organization's director, Alison

Spreading out

Nearby, on hoop courts, children and adults dribble, pass and shoot basketballs, rims rattling and players occasionally hollering in pleasure or dissatisfaction.

Beyond the courts at the opposite side of the park are more Backyard Growers raised beds.

There are 56 in the park. The beds are 4 feet wide, 8 or 10 feet long, and 2 feet deep, filled with compost donated by Black Earth Compost in Manchester-by-the-Sea.

Each bed springs forth an average of about 300 pounds of vegetables, fruits and herbs.

The Burnham's Field garden beds are reserved for people of low to moderate income. They received compost-filled beds, seeds and instructions.

Elsewhere in the city, people without income restrictions qualify for Backyard Growers garden beds.

DiFiore says that the 10-year grant has had a transformative effect, not just financially.

The nonprofit, which has six full-time employees, six board members and a lot of volunteers, was able to increase its



Bruce Shaw's role with Cummings Foundation includes regularly visiting grant recipients like Backyard Growers and seeing firsthand how the money is helping their programs.

annual budget by a third, to \$600,000.

The Cummings Foundation commitment was also an endorsement, a validation, that lends energy to the mission

— helping people connect to the food they eat in a meaningful, healthy way, by teaching them and giving them the tools to grow nutritious food.

Entire families tend to their raised beds. Fellow farmers share knowledge.

The gardens and education connect people of all ages, from preschoolers to retirees.

DiFiore, 39, has a master's degree in business administration and has worked in agriculture since she was 21, managing farming operations in Hawaii and California and New England.

She has helped Backyard Growers from its earliest days, when she was working for The Food Project in Boston and brought youths to Gloucester to volunteer, building the wooden planting beds.

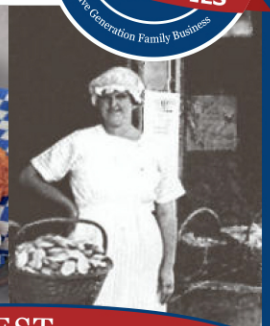
Putting down roots

Backyard Growers has itself been a growth organization, springing organically from its humble grassroots origins during the 2008 Great Recession.

In 2008, founder Lara Lepionka, an artist, planted a garden of about 21 feet by 21 feet in her small yard in downtown Gloucester. Her goal was to provide her family with produce.

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Alison DiFiore checks out what's sprouting in one of the beds at the Burnham's Field Community Garden, one of six community gardens that Backyard Growers operates in Gloucester.

She grew thousands of pounds a year in a beautifully arranged garden that drew her neighbors' attention and inspired them to grow their own food.

Lepionka taught her neighbors basic gardening and built partnerships that have continued to grow and allowed a small organization to have an outsize influence on the well-being of people in and beyond Gloucester.

Today, there are container gardens on Cape Ann front stoops, back porches and driveways.

Lepionka stepped down from her leadership position in 2022, and DiFiore became the director.

In 2024, Backyard Growers started a farmers market, the Backyard Growcery.

It is open Wednesdays from 2:30 to 6:30 p.m., through Oct. 15, in the Burnham's Field park.

Shaw is not a gardener.

He says that the only thing he grows at home is the grass on

the lawn, but he enjoys seeing his wife gain enjoyment from gardening.

His role with the 10 Cummings Foundation recipients that he visits each year is to help them build for the future. To look 10 years, 20 years into the future.

By extension, the students who learn about farming and food take that knowledge into their futures as adults.

Shaw says that Cummings Foundation funds a variety of small organizations, each dedicated to making life better for people with needs.

They might be focused on health and nutritional needs, improving language skills, or helping people with mental or physical challenges or those who have been abused.

The small organizations, in turn, become part of a network geared toward creating a better world.

"The impact collectively of that is actually quite significant," Shaw says. 🌱

A bit about Cummings Foundation

A commercial real estate engine built by Bill Cummings has fueled charitable giving of \$600 million in grants.

Each year, all Cummings Properties' profits flow to the organization's philanthropic vehicle, Cummings Foundation.

Since Cummings Foundation's start in 1986, it has awarded grants to nonprofits doing work in human services, social justice, education, health care and improving the environment.

Now, the profit from the rents on all 11 million square feet of Cummings properties flows to organizations in or near the communities where Cummings owns its buildings.

The giving has accelerated in recent decades as more resources have flowed in from Cummings Properties.

The Cummings major grant program mainly supports Massachusetts nonprofits based in and serving Middlesex, Essex and Suffolk counties.

More than 700 applicants sought grants in 2025, and \$30 million was awarded to 150 nonprofits in 51 Massachusetts towns and cities.

Reba Saldanha photo



Philanthropist Bill Cummings, the founder of Cummings Properties and Cummings Foundation, meets in his Woburn office with Joyce Vyriotes, executive director of Cummings Foundation.