

Community gardens bloom from vacant lots in Salt River

By [Matthew Hirsch](#)

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Embarrassed by the rubbish amidst Salt River's striking street art, a tour guide decided to do something about it.



The Nature Park on the corner of Fenton Road and Pope Street in Salt River was the first garden started by Neighbourhood Gardens. Photos: Matthew Hirsch / GroundUp

- A tour guide teamed up with a local horticulturist to form a non-profit organisation and create safe green spaces in the historic suburb.
- The economic crisis wrought by Covid lockdowns saw the pair pivoting from indigenous to vegetable gardens.
- Community buy-in has seen dumping sites become “beautiful spaces”.

Vacant lots that were used as dumping sites are being turned into safe gardens thanks to a non-profit organisation based in Salt River, Cape Town.

Tour guide Nadia Agherdine had the idea of turning disused spaces into gardens while she was taking two German visitors on a tour of street art in Salt River.

She said in front of one piece of art was a “huge” rubbish heap in an empty lot, which was embarrassing.

Deciding to do something about it, she teamed up with local horticulturist Marius Zenker to form Neighbourhood Gardens, a non-profit organisation. “It was the perfect match. I’m from the community and he has all the indigenous plant knowledge,” said Agherdine.



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They received funding from German organisation Stiftung Bienenwald to clear the plot and build a new fence. They called it The Nature Park and turned it into an indigenous garden.

“The community came out with spades, rakes and bags. The aunties came with water and sandwiches. It was wonderful. We cleaned up a plot and we decided it was going to be 100% indigenous. The most amazing thing that came out of that garden was the kids’ participation. They couldn’t wait to start planting and digging,” said Agherdine.

When the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown in 2020 brought home the need for food security, Agherdine and Zenker worked with the Salt River Community Action Network to start a food garden on a disused lot in Kipling Street. Again the community helped clean up the plot.

“It was just a beautiful show of what can be done if people were keen for something,” said Agherdine.

Neighbourhood Gardens now has five community gardens in Salt River, transforming about 650 square metres of vacant land. The most recently developed one being at Salt River High School where they started an indigenous plants garden in February. The school also has a food garden, implemented by the Gugulethu Urban Food Forest Initiative last year.



Nadia Agherdine, who co-founded Neighbourhood Gardens, and horticulturist Ismail Johnson sit on a bench in the Chatham Community Garden. The organisation has developed five community gardens in Salt River so far.

Safe green spaces was one of the main topics of discussion at a recent City of Cape Town meeting on the Woodstock and Salt River development framework. Agherdine said they would like to create more gardens in the area and were always on the lookout for new spaces.

Neighbourhood Gardens' flagship is the Chatham Community Garden which started in Salt River started in October 2020. The garden boasts celery, brinjals, tomatoes, sweet potato, pawpaws, figs, granadilla, peppers, spinach, and fresh herbs. It also has a bee hive and includes a learning circle where there are monthly workshops.



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“When you think about how people lost their jobs during Covid and food insecurity was a real crisis, you can make a meal and it's all fresh from the garden.”

She said it was important for people to get involved in public spaces, especially those used for dumping.

“With buy-in from the community, people can make it happen. It just takes two or three people with passion, time, and energy.”

Ismail Johnson, who lives next door to Chatham Community Garden and takes responsibility for the garden, said it was empowering to see what was a dump site and public toilet become “a beautiful space”.

Johnson said due to the current economic crisis, many people had become interested in gardening. He said the most important aspect of gardening was patience. “You'd be surprised, a small step every day... now look at us. It's a completely different space from how it started.”

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