The Garden. A place of peace, health, friendships, sharing and nutrition.

If you decided to plant a garden this spring, you will know the joys of preparing, planting, tending to the plants and giving them the essential nutrients, sunlight, water, and space to grow. The final yield or harvest is what a gardener is patiently waiting for. Our gardens teach us patience as it takes time along with many other essential elements for plants to grow healthy and in abundance. Some plants produce early in the season, but most are not ready until early August and September. It is often in late summer that most of our plants are ready to be harvested, eaten fresh, pickled, blanched and frozen, or dehydrated. All our efforts are rewarded with the beautiful colors of the rainbow in such vegetables as fresh beets, potatoes, corn, carrots, onions, beans, peas, pumpkins, cucumbers, and tomatoes. The taste of fresh vegetables when prepared and cooked or eaten raw is a special treat. The list of what we can grow in our region is quite extensive considering our short summer. Due to the long sunlight hours in the North we can grow many fruits and vegetables that will nourish our bodies, make us feel healthy and full of energy.

The garden can be a place to heal, a sanctuary, a place where we work with our hands and feel the earth, the air, the sunshine on our own bodies. These elements are just as necessary for the human spirit and body as they are for the plants. The garden gives birds, butterflies and bees a place to visit, pollinate and allow us to share the beauty of our plants with other living creatures on the planet. The garden gives back in abundance to those who tend to it and this is one reason why so many of us want to start a garden.

A community garden is equal or better than our own private garden. Many hands working towards creating the outcome all while building bonds and friendships through a common interest. There are 42 families and over 100 people who are involved in making the OCN community garden a reality on Opaskwayak Cree Nation lands. These gardens are a community led change recognizing the importance of vegetables in our diet and the relationship between nutritional food and our overall health. A community garden is so much more than just the food produced.

The OCN Community Gardens started in 2013 by Opaskwayak Culture and Healthy Living Initiatives (OCHLI). The focus of the gardens is to focus on remedies to the decline of healthy living. The gardens started by bringing in healthy topsoil that could support the plants. The gardens are building community through intergenerational teaching and learning all while creating healthy food that supports a healthy lifestyle. If you sit by a garden and watch nature you will see the many creatures that allow the garden to grow. The bee is one of these creatures that pollinates the plants. In addition to vegetables, many herbs are planted in the soil. Herbs create many different flavors in food preparation and have medicinal healing properties.

The impacts of any garden are tenfold. A garden is a living thing, so much love and attention is required to keep it healthy and disease free. The planning of the garden starts in early January with the ordering of the seeds and the planning of the planting of the seeds. Expert gardeners understand that some plants thrive growing beside other plants and require adequate amounts of sunlight, water, soil nutrients and garden space. After the garden is planted around the May long weekend, the work starts. Some plants need to be hilled, while others need to be thinned out. Weeds are plants that are displaced and will choke out the vegetable garden if they are not removed. Currently there are 42 families that are involved in the entire process of the OCN Community Gardens. They share the workload and the gathering of the foods that are produced. This group involve all ages from children, to youth, to adults to elders. The connection between people and the food that keeps them healthy is as important to the community gardeners as the produce. One objective of the group is to encourage each new member to commit at least one hour a week towards the project. It is when many people share the load that work becomes easier and more joyful. The volunteer executive welcomes other would be gardeners to be involved in the community garden. Just being outside and breathing fresh air is good for our physical body. The bending and kneeling and working the earth to plant and tend to the plants is also physically beneficial. Relationships between youth and elders teaching and learning from each other standing on the land that supports us.

As the garden grows, so does the OCHLI project. Over the past seven years, the community gardens have expanded to three vegetable gardens, and two fruit orchards. There is a community raspberry patch which yields an incredible number of berries for the enjoyment of children and adults alike. in addition to the gardens is the beekeeping. In late august, a few OCN community garden leaders shared the skills required to extract honey from the Opaskwayak Bee Nation Hives. The honey that was extracted was bottled and sold to purchase food to ensure the honeybees survive the winter months.

Some infrastructure has been built near the main garden that houses a community kitchen. It is a place where the group and community can come together to share good food, stories and continue to build a healthy, strong, supportive community. Although this year is over there is always room for more members to get involved in fundraising, planning and connecting. Please visit the OCN Community Gardens Facebook page to stay informed and connect with other gardeners.