

Questions & Answers

Common Ground Garden Center Director, Patricia Becker

By Paul Galicki

Photos courtesy of Common Ground and Friends of Common Ground

In 1972, a group of Palo Alto residents eager to care for the environment and grow organic food founded Ecology Action of the Mid Peninsula. The group's members shared a number of interests, including recycling, bicycling as a more environmentally friendly form of transportation, and growing food sustainably. Eventually, because of their shared goals, they began calling the Palo Alto-based group Common Ground.

Innovative classes and workshops taught by people like John Jeavons, inventor of the GROW BIOINTENSIVE method of sustainable agriculture, led to a vigorous community interest. The Common Ground Garden Supply and Education Center expanded, moving in 2001 to their current location on College Avenue. Today, this non-profit organization dedicated to earth-friendly agriculture offers visitors numerous informative classes, an impressive list of gardening-related supplies, and the camaraderie that comes from doing something positive with others of like mind.



How did you initially become involved with Common Ground?

I found my way to Common Ground within the first week of moving to the area in 1992. I was hired as the class coordinator in about 1993. My spirit was, and is, uplifted and inspired by the organic plants, seeds, authenticity of the products, people, and teachers involved with Common Ground. In 2000, I became the center director. It is now, more than ever before, a valuable resource center. I am so happy to be leading the way with a great staff, terrific volunteers, and supportive community. We are all co-creating together.

What does Common Ground's slogan, "Creating Abundance in Community," mean?

It means we are creating an abundance of fertile soil, food, flowers, seeds, beauty, health, friends, kindness, integrity, respect, diversity, and gratitude.

As a non-profit organization, does a supportive community play an important role in Common Ground's continued existence?

A very important role! We are here because of the financial support we receive from those who care to see Common Ground in their future.

Why do you think so many people are eager to donate their time and money to Common Ground?

People recognize the value of participating with sustainable green gardening and living in a healthier and more joyful way. The Common Ground "family of friends" is a positive group of people. We uplift and remind each other of our interconnection to all living things. Some have money to contribute and some have time. We are grateful for our donors, volunteers, customers, students, teachers, and good neighbors.

What are your goals for Common Ground?

We envision people from all over the Bay Area being inspired by what they learn from Common Ground's classes. We want as many people as possible to attend these fabulous events, to shop for all their garden supplies, and to grow or expand their edible garden plots. We want the students to be teachers and share their wisdom with their friends and neighbors. The big vision is to have our demonstration garden, a larger

classroom/community room, and the supply store all on one beautiful piece of land. We want the larger classroom so we'll have room for all of the students who want to attend the educational events and seasonal garden celebrations.

How can people get involved and help Common Ground?

There are many ways to get involved. Large and small tax deductible contributions are welcome and greatly appreciated. We encourage participation in classes and events to learn and make friends. We like people to build or expand friendships with those they meet at Common Ground. Word of mouth is the best advertising, so please tell a friend about us. We have a variety of volunteer positions people may inquire about, including an opening for a web-savvy person to post our classes online. Our steering committee plans for long-term goals and may even need a few more passionate, team-spirited people involved. We have a vision for the center with a bigger classroom and the demonstration garden all on one piece of land. This will make educating the growing numbers of people, organizations, clubs, and schools coming to Common Ground for answers and products much more efficient and effective.

What is the GROW BIOINTENSIVE method of sustainable agriculture and how does it work?

Eight essential aspects form the foundation of GROW BIOINTENSIVE sustainable agriculture: double-dug, raised beds; composting; intensive planting; companion planting; carbon farming; calorie farming; the use of open-pollinated seeds; and a whole-system farming method.

Most life in nature occurs at the interface of soil, water, air, and sun. GROW BIOINTENSIVE soil preparation practices create growing beds with more surface area to maximize the effect of nature's life processes. Double-dug beds, with soil loosened to a depth of twenty-four inches, aerate the soil, facilitate root growth, and improve water retention. The health and vigor of the soil are maintained through the use of compost. Close plant spacing is used to protect soil microorganisms, reduce water loss, and maximize yields. Companion planting facilitates the optimal use of nutrients, light, and water; encourages beneficial insects; and creates a vibrant mini-ecosystem within the garden. A focus on the production of calories for the farmer and carbon for the soil ensures that both the farmer and the soil will be adequately

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fed and that the farm will be sustainable. The use of open-pollinated seeds helps to preserve genetic diversity and enables gardeners to develop their own acclimatized cultivars.

Why is it so important that people practice sustainable agriculture for themselves?

Growing and harvesting vegetables, fruits, and herbs locally is important because of the relationships we build with our soil, our seasons, our food supply, and ourselves. I know my health and wellbeing are directly related to what I am eating, so I appreciate eating foods grown with the hands and hearts of real farmers and gardeners that tend the soil with appreciation and respect. For me, the look, feel, and taste of this food is the very importation as well as the foundational nourishment of my health. Healthier individuals create a healthier environment. Food imported from afar, harvested weeks or months prior, and transported using vast amounts of precious resources doesn't make sense or taste very good! The food we eat affects our thoughts. When we eat whole foods, we think in a more wholistic way and are able to make better decisions for ourselves and for the environment.

What makes organically grown produce better than the alternative?

Organically grown food tastes better, feels better, and is more nutritious. I prefer to minimize or eliminate pesticides or herbicides, chemicals, genetically modified foods, and petroleum product residues from my diet and from our air and water supplies. I do not need government agencies to spend thousands of our

tax dollars to study the effects of chemicals in the food. I know organic produce raised by family farmers is the best food for the body, mind, and spirit. Organically grown food is better for the earth, air, water, birds, pollinators, and the people living on the land.

How does the environment benefit from Common Ground's classes and workshops?

The more people are inspired, informed, and educated, the more people will find joy in gardening and taking care of the environment. Gardening is a rewarding hobby with numerous benefits: creating a sense of belonging and community; nourishing yourself with sunshine; growing and harvesting fresh, delicious, and nutritious food; getting exercise; observing the beauty of flower blossoms; slowing down; being with the birds and insects; and caring for a piece of land. Planting and caring for a piece of earth, small or large, makes us feel very empowered and peaceful.

What kind of events can people expect to see at Common Ground in the next few weeks?

There are a number of exciting events coming up at Common Ground. On Saturday, July 12th at 10:30 am, we have an excellent class on healthy disease and pest controls with Annie Joseph, a thirty-year California Certified Nursery Professional. She'll be showing the class safe ways to manage garden pests and diseases while inviting beneficial insects to become a permanent part of a healthy yard. July 19th at 10:30 am, a week later, people can register for "Backyard Decorating: How to Create an Enchanting Garden," with interior designer and author Kit Davey. With the knowledge you take away from this class, you'll be able to create

a garden that truly expresses who you are. More information about these and other Common Ground classes and events can be found at www.commongroundinpaloalto.org, or you can call 650-493-6072 for more information and to register for the classes of your choice. Many classes are already filling up, so please call today!

Other than gardening resources, what can people expect to find at Common Ground?

You will meet new friends in the classes. Start a conversation with a fellow customer, share a story, or lend a listening ear while browsing the tomato or tool selections in our supply shop. Volunteer in a community of like-minded people. You will experience a great feeling of connection.

If you could ask people to do one thing to affect the environment positively, what would it be?

Start or expand edible gardens. This will have a terrific influence and impact on how you eat and feel. Eating fresh, local produce instead of purchasing food shipped in from afar, you're making a powerful decision to take better care of yourself, your local community, and our planet's precious resources. Once you begin to eat freshly harvested local food, you never want to turn back. It tastes so good, is so satisfying, and will have a positive effect on other decisions you make. The Earth gives us everything that we eat and drink, in turn giving us life. That makes the Earth truly our Mother Earth. She is a living being, so let us all remember to treat her with love and respect. Gardening is a fantastic way to show love for the Earth while feeling great with every dig of the trowel and every bountiful harvest.

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