

## The Glasgow Gardening Group

This is a small group of six people on a 10 week BTCV gardening course. Five were able to come. All are newcomers to BTCV with one exception. One of the men have been doing some kind of BTCV activities for over 2 and a half years.

The three women are asylum seekers from the Congo. They all have children. Their days are filled with going to college in the morning every day with the exception of the one morning each week with BTCV. The rest of the days and the weekends are occupied with caring for their children. They are under constant stress because of their status as asylum seekers. Two of them have been here for 5 years, with no idea of when the decision about them will come.

They say that it makes them live from day to day unable to plan, so that they feel they are living with no visible future. Recently, on the estate where they live, a woman with children had been snatched by the Immigration Department in the middle of the night. The door to their flat had been smashed. They feel traumatised by the fact that if their application is finally refused, they too will be treated like this, with the prospect of being returned to their country in which they feel their lives will be in danger. Two of the women understand everything said at the workshop and speak good English now, while the third understands most of what is being said but still cannot spontaneously take part in the conversation very well. Her writing shows how much she can grasp and the competence in language she actually has.

“It is fascinating to discover what nature is like and how wonderful it is through gardening, for example, these tiny seeds - who would image they grow into onions or leeks.”

“Outings to the countryside or any activities that are fun with our children during weekends or school holiday time would be great. We are so stressed all the time.”

“Being in this group really helped me to speak English - things are repeated, the people the same. One cannot learn at college although there are many students in the class. Everyone in the class has poor English and you do not hear English being spoken by British people, or have a familiar setting with people who accept you.”

“It is easier to start conversations with a task in common to talk about. Words are repeated so we pick them up. Being a small group was extremely important - it enabled us to form a proper group.”

“It was so lonely before. How can one make friends without being able to speak the language. One cannot just let strangers off the street into one’s home without knowing them at all. There is no one to introduce us to anyone. It is good to be part of a group doing something. One does not have to talk, but one hears everything repeated and it helps you to learn a language and to speak socially. It is the same people all the time and you begin to get to know them and trust them and become friends. Our children pick up English and make friends quickly at school but that does not mean we make friends with their parents - they do not want us. “

The two white men are unemployed, and have mental health issues. The younger man has been staying at home for 2 years 'doing nothing'. He has an environmental degree but feels as a result of the course, that he is at the moment it would suit his needs better to do something more practical and which has a social context. He aspires to being a gardener now. The older white man says that through BTCV he has discovered volunteering and that he wants to work in the voluntary sector. He also says that he feels that what volunteers do are 'jobs' and that volunteering should be looked at in that way, with the status of jobs because of what is achieved. He feels that it is demeaning to call people who volunteer full-time unemployed with all the stereotyping that goes with it. Being at BTCV is his life now. He would like to find his role here and proposes he can be, for example, a buddy for newcomers.

"After being ill, I could not start again and think about work or people. People at BTCV do not judge me negatively for having no job or having life difficulties. There is no pressure of this kind here. It gave me the space to find my way in my own time. It also offers other job choices. I was encouraged to go to study and go to university but I now think the choices were wrong for me. I would like something more practical. I enjoy being outside and working in a team with people."

"Making new friends has been important. We got to know each other as a natural thing while doing gardening. Trust grew as we got to know about each other over time. What was nice was having no pressure to make friends, but just growing into friendship. I am sure being a very small group made it easier as well."

"Being part of a group gives me a group of familiar people to relate to because I have no other regular outside contacts because of being unemployed."

"I have been here as an asylum seeker for 5 years. I do not know when a decision will be made as to whether I can have refugee status. Without this knowledge, I cannot plan. I feel I have no future. From day to day I live in dread that I and my children will be snatched away and dumped back in Congo where our lives will be in danger. That happened to someone on the council estate I live in. They come and break down the door in the middle of the night while you are sleeping."

"When I arrived here for a whole year I had no voice because of language. It is easy for children, one month and they pick it up, but I go to language school and it is really hard. From day to day people stared at me and said nasty things and I could not explain anything or tell them who or what I am as a person. It is a terrible prison of silence."

"I did nothing for two years before I came to BTCV through finding out about activities the Internet. The Gardening Course has enabled me to make a new start. I can choose how to tell my story with a new group of people who have accepted me as who I want to show myself to be, without the baggage of my past. I have been to university, but being with a small group of people has shown me that I want something that enables me to be with people and now I aspire to be a gardener."

"For us, where would one really get a real experience of what asylum seekers are like? My dad has very narrow views. This group has allowed me to get to know them as people and find out they are nothing like what you read in the paper. It has been very important to me

to discover this. I now really want society to support asylum seekers and understand and address the problems we create for them

I also want to share skills and exchange skills with people from other cultures. It is so interesting.”

“It is lovely to be a volunteer and feel appreciated for contributing to others’ lives. Without an experience like this, many people, especially if they are poor, do not want to volunteer. They think 'why should they ask me to do something for nothing when we have no money? ' Without experiencing the two way nature of volunteering, they initially think it is another kind of exploitation. Like me, they need an experience to find out that there are many benefits they can gain. It is not true that all unemployed people want to do nothing. We have really bad press. I want to contribute. Here I have found something that is not a job but I am contributing.”

See Calthorpe Matrix 1 for details of what activities the group has done and what else they would like to do.

See Calthorpe Matrix 2 for details of what the activities mean and how they have made a difference to their lives.