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The Green Issue

Urban Vegetable Gardens, New Urbanism Update and more



Green

Budding trends in apartment living

By Joshua Ayers, Senior Editor

Light glistens off of the dew drops that have collected on the rough tops of blue-green Lacinato kale leaves revealing tiny rainbows as it refracts the sun's rays. A few feet away, fava bean seedlings have pushed through the overwinter compost and have begun their ascent to maturity, and by harvest time they will have helped fix enough nitrogen into the soil to fuel next season's rotation of leafy greens like rainbow chard, arugula and New Zealand spinach.

While this setting may seem like a scene straight out of a field in a large-scale organic or industrialized food-growing operation, it's actually taking place in a multifamily vegetable garden—just one of a handful of emerging green amenities such as bike repair stations, electric vehicle charging stations and salt water pools that are taking root at apartment communities across the country.

"We introduced our first P-Patch at Alcyone Apartments in 2004," says Megan Murphy, Vulcan Inc.'s residential marketing manager. "This was the first market-rate LEED-certified apartment building in Seattle. We had about a dozen planters and it soon became very popular with the residents."

The P-Patch Murphy refers to is a community garden, and the amenity proved to be popular enough that two more were built at two additional Vulcan multifamily projects, The Martin, and Stack House. The basic set-up of the community garden includes raised beds with specific areas that residents can sign up for on a first-come first-served basis. Residents can grow their own fruits and vegetables for personal use and to trade with other resident gardeners.

During the initial lease-up at the communities, Murphy says that the company hires an urban gardener to plant and tend to the garden until the plots can be assigned to residents. The urban garden-



Amenities

er is also contracted to hold classes that help to educate residents on gardening techniques, what types of vegetables and herbs to plant and when to harvest.

“The main reason we decided to work with an urban gardener is to assure the P-patch will look presentable during lease-up as well as to educate the residents on caring for the planters once we transfer them over to the community,” she says. Harvests have been so successful that gardeners have been able to glean their excess crops for charitable contributions at a local homeless shelter.

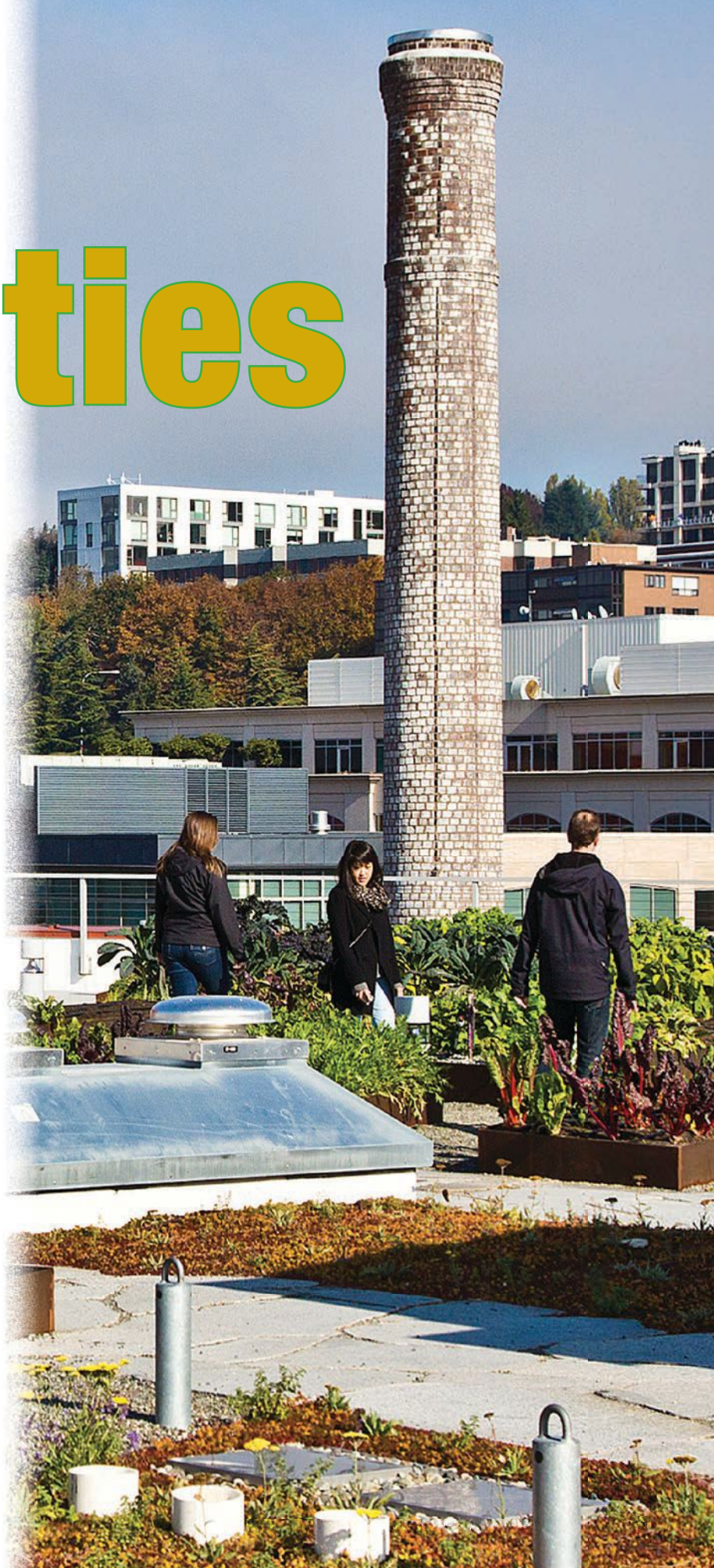
Creating that sort of community involvement seems to be the determining factor in the success of these emerging green amenities. Crescent Communities’ Director of Innovation and Sustainability, Jenny Vallimont, says that one of the top priorities in the implementation and development of green services at Crescent’s properties is to make sure that they’re in step with the greater community’s infrastructure goals such as bike-share and car-share programs.

“Trying to build a community network with what’s around us has been really key,” she says. “It’s about connecting our residents, whether it’s connecting them within our actual development, with other residents, or beyond our community.”

Vallimont notes that green programs such as community gardens or other such amenities or services need to have well-thought programming in place for them to be successful. “It’s one thing to put in the community garden, but how are we programming it for the

Residents attend to the P-Patch community garden space at Vulcan Real Estate’s mixed-use residential community, Stack House, in the South Lake Union neighborhood of Seattle.

Photos by Michael Walmsley, courtesy of Vulcan Inc.



residents to actually use it? How do they learn from it? How does it become an amenity through the programming itself? That's probably where the heavy lifting is going to continue to be in our industry," observes Vallimont.

One example that she points to is Uptown Charlotte's vision of creating a more bikable city with its Charlotte B-Cycle bike share program. The city has allowed for the installation of a complex network of bike share stations across the Queen City. Vallimont says that this infrastructure has piqued the interest of Crescent and notes that one of Crescent's upcoming apartment communities, Crescent Dilworth, will include a B-Cycle station once it is completed.

"That project is along our greenway here in Charlotte and we thought it was crucial, not just to have access for our residents to be able to get onto a greenway, but to be able to connect into that infrastructure with the bike share that's already within Charlotte."

Working with Charlotte's lead on creating a more bike-friendly



city has encouraged Crescent to examine the possibility of enhancing its communities with complementary amenities such as bike repair stations, or more bike storage areas. "We're also looking at bike rentals for long-term riding," says Vallimont. "We're looking at offering our residents [the opportunity] to pick up a bike so you can go out and do a 20- or 30-mile ride. It's not necessarily the same kind of cyclist who is going to go and jump into an urban ride. These are hard-core cyclists."

While incorporating these amenities is hit or miss, the fact that they are available is what tends to drive residents to communities.

"Generally we find that prospective tenants are interested in a lot of amenities even if they won't use them," Murphy explains. "For example at The Martin we have a bike-repair area where we supply the tools to fix a tire or perform a tune-up, but we are finding that only about 15 percent of the bike-owners are utilizing the equipment. Our bike storage is almost full, but not everyone who owns a bike necessarily knows how to work on one."

This community demand for green amenities carries over to oth-

er municipal offerings as well. In Seattle, at Vulcan's South Lake Union area communities, demand for amenities such as car charging stations has been extremely low likely in part to the neighborhood's walkability and bikability, but also due to the existence of charging stations located in the neighborhood and the South Lake Union Streetcar.

"We did include electric vehicle charging stations in some of our earlier projects, but there wasn't tremendous demand," Murphy says. "That, paired with the increasing availability of charging stations throughout the area, has led us to stop putting them in our projects. By contrast, ZipCars are increasingly in demand, so we have three ZipCars located at Stack House and two at The Martin."

To build it or not to build it?

Some of the other green amenities that have been gaining in popularity in recent years include car charging stations, saltwater

"We did include electric vehicle charging stations in some of our earlier projects, but there wasn't tremendous demand."

—Megan Murphy, Vulcan Inc.



pools and landscaped common areas that utilize green irrigation techniques and native plant selection. But demand for sustainable communities and their green amenities are dependent on the presence of a demographic base that wants them.

Carroll Organization's Keith Conner, director of construction management notes dramatic demand differences for green community elements over relatively small geographical areas such as Austin versus Houston, or even in-town Atlanta vs its suburbs.

"I think it's going to be dependent on a property by property basis because when we acquisition a property we look at the needs of a marketplace and if the comps are doing it or if the market demands a certain amenity," he says. "Whether it be a car charging station or a vegetable garden or what not, then we're certainly open to those ideas in order to make it competitive and also make it something so that the people who are willing to pay to live there have that sort of amenity."

Linda Masterson, senior vice president at Carroll Management Group gives two examples of properties within Carroll Organiza-

tion's Houston area portfolio where the organization has observed a demand from residents to incorporate bicycle amenities and services at communities. The first is at the organization's Green Trails property in Houston, where residents use the open spaces of the nearby George Bush Park for physical activities.

"That specific property we do provide actual property bicycles for them to utilize on a regular basis," she says.

The second example is at Towne Lake, a student-oriented community adjacent to Lone Star Community College where bicycles are great for transportation, and the community is located in an area where the service is going to be used.

Masterson says that the markets she perceives as ripe for green amenities, specifically car-charging stations, within Carroll Organization's geographic range, are in Austin, Texas, Raleigh, N.C. and Atlanta, noting that Austin is a very environmentally conscientious town, while Raleigh tends to have a larger student base that would

"We are extensively looking at smart irrigation controllers right now, which is a weather-based controller system, which really monitors and limits your irrigation based on what's going on within the needs of the plants," Vallimont says. The system can be programmed to know what types of plants are located within certain landscaped zones, and then it adjusts the irrigation needs based on precipitation, humidity and the needs within the zones.

Vallimont adds that reducing the demand for irrigation starts with plant selection and that Crescent Communities has already started to identify plants for its communities that will provide a nice space for residents, without the need to use excess water.

The price of green

In past years, there was a perception among renters that living in a sustainable community equated to higher rents, and as a result, some communities strayed from marketing their communities as



likely want the services. Pools and landscaped areas have long been a major prospect-attracting feature for multifamily communities. But there are steps that can be taken to enhance these amenities in order to bring them more in line with sustainable practices.

While there is debate as to whether or not salt-water pools versus traditionally chlorinated pools are greener, some companies are starting to move in this direction in order to reduce the demand for concentrated chlorine, a chemical toxic to humans, flora and fauna, at their communities.

"There has been a really big push with newer development to have salt water pools," Masterson says. "It's better for the people; it's better for the environment. From a cost savings, it's good business. So I think you'll see more of that in the future."

On the landscaping front, irrigation tends to be a major cost and communities can make improvements to green up those spaces by incorporating native plants into the landscape as well as mulching to preserve moisture retention in the soil and invest in better irrigation management equipment.

green. But as the green building techniques have gained momentum and the demand for green has increased, communities may not stray from that marketing as they once did.

At Vulcan's communities in Seattle, Murphy notes that green was always a selling point. "[Our] prospective residents want to live in a green building. It's almost a requirement. If we didn't market our green features we would be at a disadvantage," Murphy says.

At Carroll Organization, Masterson says that perceptions of green communities are shifting among its renter base.

"I think that it is changing," she says. "I think maybe the association is more that perhaps a newer property may have more efficiencies built in, and a newer property may end up costing you more, but I think there are really no price differentials for the kinds of things that are being offered today ... The regulations in the utility companies are interested in the conservation effects as well so I think that it's just good business." MHN

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