

## In Salt Lake City, gardener **Ashley Patterson** wants to make fresh food available to everyone.



DAVID KARAS

**FOR CITY RESIDENTS:** Wasatch Community Gardens, led by Ashley Patterson, interacts with some 10,000 individuals and families each year.

By David Karas / Correspondent

SALT LAKE CITY

In the 1980s, Ashley Patterson’s mother was a farmer – and in many ways a trailblazer. Managing some 240 acres of fruit trees, she realized she had to set her business apart from others to be competitive, so she began field-packing and selling produce long before the widespread popularity of farmers markets.

But Ms. Patterson’s mother had to do more than just find creative ways to sustain her orchard. She was also navigating what was, at the time, an industry with relatively few women.

“She brought a unique female-centered worldview to farming,” Patterson says. “I watched her struggle in a pretty male-dominated field for a long time, especially 40 years ago. And I was really inspired by the fact that she could come up with a vision that created a niche.”

In many ways, Patterson is following in her mother’s footsteps through her work as executive director of Wasatch Community Gardens (WCG), a Salt Lake City nonprofit founded in 1989 that offers

garden space, educational programs, and community events to help local residents unite around nutritious, fresh food.

Whether it is through facilitating school garden projects or working with women facing homelessness to build job skills,

**‘Ashley [Patterson] really believes in the mission of [Wasatch Community Gardens], which is visible when she ... can’t stop smiling and talking about the great tomato harvest.’**

– **Supreet Gill**, Salt Lake County’s urban farming program manager

the mission is the same across the organization’s programs.

“It’s really about making sure that healthy food is available to everyone,” says

Patterson, adding, “Not only should it be accessible to everyone, but it is really a good way to connect and equalize people.”

In 2017, WCG enabled some 445 individuals and families to grow their own organic produce in the nonprofit’s gardens. More than half of those participants qualify as low- or moderate-income, and they include at least 89 refugee families.

All told, WCG says that it has more than 1,000 volunteers and interacts with some 10,000 individuals and families each year through activities ranging from small workshops to larger community events.

“This isn’t rocket science: Growing some food is something virtually everyone can do,” Patterson says. “[Our focus] is more about encouraging others to grow food and less about doing it ourselves.”

Patterson has never strayed too far from working around food. Her second major in college was environmental studies, and her interest in organic food led to some graduate studies. To give people better access to fresh produce, she started a farmers market while living in

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Jackson, Wyo.

After moving to Salt Lake City, Patterson leveraged her interest in environmentally friendly building techniques and materials by founding the Green Building Center. The company offered a variety of products for building and remodeling projects, and it was doing well. But the housing downturn and a host of canceled projects forced the company to close its doors.

### Greenhouse expertise

It was while Patterson was running her business that she first came into contact with WCG. “I was asked to join the board when the organization was building a straw bale greenhouse,” she says. She helped with that building process and spent some six years on the board. Around 2012, her board service came to an end, and the position of executive director became available. She was compelled to apply.

“I missed being involved,” she says. “I enjoyed the sense of community, all the great people. I love what the organization does.”

The community gardens that the nonprofit operates put together a range of people, Patterson notes, from working professionals to refugees. The latter group, she says, tend to teach their fellow garden-

ers their simple but effective gardening techniques. WCG partners with schools, social-service organizations, and community programs to extend gardening opportunities to youths. It has also launched a partnership with Valley Behavioral Health, a network of clinics, to offer such opportunities to people with mental disabilities.

One of WCG’s newest initiatives, the Green Team Farm Project, is in part a job training program. Participants – women facing homelessness – learn basic organic farming techniques as well as job and life skills while overseeing planting, harvesting, and maintenance at a farm managed by the nonprofit. They earn an average of \$9 per hour. In addition, partner organizations work with participants to line up stable housing and help them navigate judicial processes and other situations.

The idea came as homelessness was becoming more of a challenge in Salt Lake City, Patterson says. The program, which began in 2016, has been growing as much as the produce, and Patterson sees how the participants benefit from “horticulture therapy.” “No matter what, you get a real impact from just being able to be around plants,” she says.

Financial support for the nonprofit – in the form of grants, capital campaign contributions, donations, and sponsorships – continues to rise, Patterson says. WCG’s 2017 budget was around \$929,000.

### A refugee and urban gardening

Zana Jokic, a garden participant for eight years, moved to Salt Lake City as a refugee. She says WCG was pivotal in helping her integrate into the community. Ms. Jokic came to the nonprofit without any knowledge of how to grow food in an urban environment, although she had a background in humanitarian aid in the Peace Corps.

“I was from the beginning impressed with their ideas of urban farming,... growing organic food, building relations in [the] community, [and] supporting all positive ideas of local development,” Jokic says in an email interview. She notes that she has met gardeners representing at least 20 nationalities, communicating with one another in “one language of gardening.”

Reflecting on the staff of the nonprofit, Jokic says she has “learned from the best.” She also speaks fondly of Patterson.

“Ashley is [a] very good manager of WCG but I know her as [a] member and fellow gardener,” Jokic says. “She is very open in communication, always has time to communicate with members and listen [to] suggestions. You can see transformation in WCG by her management.”

Supreet Gill is Salt Lake County’s urban

## Three other groups with food initiatives

**UniversalGiving** ([www.universalgiving.org](http://www.universalgiving.org)) helps people give to and volunteer for top-performing charitable organizations around the world. All the projects below are vetted by UniversalGiving; 100 percent of each donation goes directly to the listed cause.

■ **Mexican Association for Rural and Urban Transformation** (<http://bit.ly/MexTransform>) promotes the renewal of marginalized communities in Mexico through various programs. Take action: Learn to organically produce food as a volunteer at an ecological center in Palenque, Mexico (<http://bit.ly/MexVol>).

■ **Silicon Valley Children’s Fund** (<http://bit.ly/SVChildFund>) is committed to improving the educational outcomes, career prospects, and overall lives of foster youths. Take action: Feed a foster child for a week (<http://bit.ly/WeekFood>).

■ **Monument Crisis Center** (<http://bit.ly/MonumentCC>) provides safety-net services to low-income people in California’s Contra Costa County. Take action: Donate funds so families have food and other essentials (<http://bit.ly/MonumentDonate>).



ers their simple but effective gardening techniques.

“The idea of mixing incomes has always been very important to the organization,” she says. “That’s what keeps me going to work every day – that idea of connecting people in a really simple way, in a really nonthreatening way, in a way that can build lasting relationships.”

farming program manager. WCG coordinates day-to-day activities at the county’s five community gardens. Ms. Gill has been involved with the nonprofit since taking a community gardens leadership training course in 2011.

“WCG is instrumental in providing some much-needed services ...,” she says in an email interview. “Salt Lake County has only a few non-profits that are successfully and positively impacting our local food system.”

Gill says the nonprofit has a track record of well-managed, successful programs, and she credits Patterson.

“Ashley is a great leader and a true visionary. She is just as comfortable in a board room as she is getting her hands dirty in the compost pile,” Gill says. “Ashley really believes in the mission of WCG, which is visible when she pulls up on her bike, sweating on a hot day, but can’t stop smiling and talking about the great tomato harvest.”

Patterson believes strongly in the power of gardening. “We are becoming such a segmented society about our political views, and this and that,” she says. “This is a great way to set that aside.... We are humans, we eat, [and] we all love good food.”

■ For more, visit [wasatchgardens.org](http://wasatchgardens.org).