

## LOCAL NON-PROFIT ORGANIC GARDENING BEACON TO GO DARK

*Common Ground Garden Supply and Education Center in Palo Alto to Close after 43 Years in Business.*

### Short Release:

An era of local sustainable gardening activism that started in the early 1970s is coming to a close in Palo Alto, CA. The local non-profit *Common Ground Garden Supply and Education Center*, located at 559 College Ave in Palo Alto, will be closing its doors by the end of October 2014 at the latest, but likely sooner.

A combination of reduced gardening activity due to the prolonged drought, a two-year construction project impeding access to the store, and advances in the sale of garden products by numerous online organizations and box stores meant that the store has virtually no foot traffic, and has been placed in an untenable financial situation.

Common Ground is a project of Ecology Action, the globally active nonprofit founded in Palo Alto with the focus of: *Teaching people worldwide to better feed themselves locally, while building and preserving the soil and conserving resources.* Although the store is closing, the Ecology Action's *Common Ground Research and Demonstration Garden* is remaining open as a resource to the public. Sustainable gardening classes for children, teens and adults will continue to be offered here.

For more information and class schedules, go to [commongroundgarden.org](http://commongroundgarden.org)

To the local organic gardeners who will miss our products, our sister organization Bountiful Gardens (Ecology Action's non-profit online organic seed, book and tool store at [bountifulgardens.org](http://bountifulgardens.org)) can help with your future gardening needs.

It has been an honor and a privilege for the staff at Common Ground Garden Supply and Education Center to be a part of our community. We hope that you will each continue to care for your part of the Earth—your garden—and that you will share what you have learned from us with others. We thank you for your friendship, your patronage, and for the difference your purchases made in the lives of others across the state and across the world. We welcome supporters of Common Ground Center to continue to support Ecology Action's global mission. See [growbiointensive.org](http://growbiointensive.org) for details and opportunities to apply your talents and resources to our work.

### Extended Article:

In 1970, a group of Palo Alto citizens began a non-profit organization called Ecology Action to promote the idea, unusual at the time, that individual citizens could recycle household paper, glass, metal and cardboard rather than sending it to the landfill. The project was so successful that Ecology Action won three prizes for their work, and the city of Palo Alto took over the recycling center. A few years later, curbside recycling was instituted in Palo Alto, all as a result of this "little project that could".

Excited by their success, the Ecology Action members and other interested Palo Alto citizens met in November of 1971 and nominated fifty "next possible projects" for the group to take on. In December,

they chose four: a bicycle workshop, an organic gardening store, an organic gardening education center, and an organic demonstration garden.

The bicycle project was launched by repurposing “Penguin”—the huge, unwieldy truck formerly used to transport recyclables—into a bicycle repair station, where classes on bicycling and bicycle maintenance were offered. The bike lanes installed on Palo Alto’s roadways are due in part to this educational initiative, and bicycle workshop coordinator Ric Hjertberg and his brother Jon eventually formed their own company, Wheelsmith, which became one of the best bicycle stores in the San Francisco area, specializing in custom-built bikes.

Ecology Action realized that the organic gardening store, educational center, and garden projects would have difficulty succeeding alone, but that working together they could produce a synergistic effect. The result of this synergy was the *Common Ground Garden Supply and Education Center* and the *Common Ground Research and Demonstration Garden*, both located in Palo Alto, CA. With a motto of “shop organic, learn organic” the store quickly became a resource, not just for the mid-peninsula, but for the greater Bay Area and beyond, with people travelling from as far away as Los Angeles for a yearly pilgrimage to purchase the bulk seeds that could be spooned out of their jars like penny candy. The store is staffed by individuals very knowledgeable in organic gardening, provides high-quality tools, books, seeds, and supplies, and also offers weekly Saturday classes on a wide variety of sustainable backyard gardening and urban homesteading topics.

But if this were just a regular organic gardening store—no matter how interesting its beginnings—then the story of its closing wouldn’t be all that remarkable. But this is no ordinary store. With the inception of the three interrelated gardening projects, Ecology Action’s greater purpose crystallized into the mission that guides it today. With a concern about worldwide starvation and malnutrition, a desire to create a truly sustainable farming model that people everywhere could use, and a drive to educate people to use ultra-small-scale farming to create their own local and sustainable food webs came the theme: *Teaching people worldwide to better feed themselves locally, while building and preserving the soil and conserving resources.*

After a five-month search for land, the Syntex Corporation graciously offered the projects 3.75 acres of their grounds in the Stanford Industrial Park, with all the necessary water. A half-acre was used for the Common Ground Garden and the rest became a community garden. Here, over the next several years, Ecology Action developed what was to become the mainstay of its education and demonstration programs: the GROW BIOINTENSIVE® Sustainable Mini-Farming approach, which enables small farmers and backyard gardeners to increase yields by 100%, build soil fertility 60 times faster than in nature, reduce land use by 50% and reduce water use by an amazing **88%**. The first edition of the sustainable gardening classic *“How to Grow More Vegetables”* (now in its 8<sup>th</sup> printing and translated into nine languages) was written during this time and describes the method in detail.

Using this method over the last 43 years, Ecology Action educated and encouraged people to grow their own food in California, across the US, and in 143 countries around the world. And all this time, Common Ground Garden Supply and Education Center and its customers have been instrumental in supporting

these non-profit educational initiatives, and in particular, are responsible for spreading Biointensive education to Kenya, where an estimated 2.5 million farmers now use these techniques.

Unfortunately, it seems that this era of local sustainable gardening activism is coming to a close in Palo Alto. A combination of reduced gardening activity due to the prolonged drought, a two-year construction project commencing across from its location on College Avenue impeding access to the store, and advances in the sale of garden products by numerous online organizations and box stores meant that the store has virtually no foot traffic, and has been placed in an untenable financial situation. As a result, the Common Ground Garden Supply and Education Center in Palo Alto will be closing its doors by the end of October 2014 at the latest, but likely sooner.

It is a sad thing to lose this local organic gardening resource with skilled staff which serves not only Palo Alto but the Bay Area as a whole. The importance of the local food web, which Common Ground has worked so hard to grow, is underscored by San Francisco's recent decision to provide tax breaks to people who allow their vacant lots and yards to be used to grow food in the community. An increase in food prices generally, emphasized by the drought, make projects like this an important part of maintaining our regional food sovereignty and resilience.

Food is such a basic part of our lives, and it is so important that urban/suburban residents who have access to even small plots of land maintain their ability to grow healthy food that can feed them, and their communities, in a sustainable manner. For over four decades, Common Ground has been a vital resource for people learning to grow nutritious, healthy, inexpensive food right *where they are*. This is not just another small business going under – it is a reflection of the de-localization of our resources and the outsourcing of a way of life which began in the 1970s with a vision of a world in which friends and neighbors – here at home and around the world – could learn from each other to create stronger, more vibrant and resilient lives and communities.

Although the store is closing, the Common Ground Research and Demonstration garden is remaining open. It is a much smaller garden than the original (which moved from Syntex property when the company needed to develop the land in 1980), currently located in Barron Park at 687 Arastradero Road in Palo Alto, on land kindly loaned to Ecology Action by the Palo Alto Christian Reformed Church; 3000 children from 5 schools within walking distance have access to our gardening programs. Primary, middle and high-school students are involved in learning sustainable gardening through classes offered there, and curricula are being developed as a result of these educational programs that can be used not just in Palo Alto, but throughout the United States. Some classes for adults will continue to be offered through the Common Ground Garden. For more information, go to [commongroundgarden.org](http://commongroundgarden.org)

To the local organic gardeners who will miss our products and want to continue to support Ecology Action's sustainable gardening education programs, Common Ground's sister organization Bountiful Gardens (a non-profit online organic seed, book and tool store at [bountifulgardens.org](http://bountifulgardens.org)) can help with your future gardening needs.

It has been an honor and a privilege for the staff at Common Ground Garden Supply and Education Center to be a part of our community, and to watch so many of you grow from garden-curious to garden

enthusiasts. We hope that you will each continue to care for your part of the Earth—your garden—and that you will share what you have learned from us with others. We thank you for your friendship, your patronage, and for the difference your purchases made in the lives of others across the state and across the world. We welcome supporters of Common Ground Center to continue to support Ecology Action's global mission. See [www.growbiointensive.org](http://www.growbiointensive.org) for details and opportunities to apply your talents and resources to our work.

Common Ground Garden Supply and Education Center, 559 College Ave., Palo Alto, CA 94306.  
[commongroundinpaloalto.org](http://commongroundinpaloalto.org)