

North 40 gardeners' time could be running out

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Sitting in his car Tuesday evening, Michael Tobin had a hard time recalling each and every crop that's growing. Just off Weston Road in garden plot 29.

The ones he could remember included three different kinds of lettuce, four different kinds of tomatoes, horseradish, raspberries, strawberries and artichokes, to name a few.

Tobin's name was on a waiting list for five years. When his turn finally came, he and his wife moved into plot 29. They've mended the fence, replenished the soil, and raised crops in ever-increasing amounts that have taken up more space on their dinner table each year.

The squash—both butternut and yellow—are staples at the Tobin family Thanksgiving feast. But, according to a letter sent to Tobin and his fellow gardeners by Wellesley College, Thanksgiving 2015 could be the last time they're able to enjoy the yield from their garden on the edge of the college's North 40 property.

"We share successes and failures, we share seeds and seedlings in the spring and we share what we've grown," Tobin said of the gardening community. He and others have been promised one more growing season as the college actively seeks to sell the 46 undeveloped acres next to Moses Pond. After that, the only thing guaranteed is an uncertain future for the community gardens.

"It would be very sad," Tobin said of the potential closure of the North 40 gardens. "You certainly get to know your neighbors in the surrounding plots."

A former chemist a few plots over from the Tobins shares a trove of knowledge about plant diseases and fungicides. A handful of gardeners can measure their plots' lives in decades. "There's really a diverse community of people that garden there," he said.

Last weekend the gardeners welcomed more than 100 people to the area to show off the area to those who otherwise might not have known the gardens were there. Fifty people on a trail walk stopped by, and 60 more came solely to see the gardens.

The waiting list for a garden on the North 40 is currently 60 deep, Tobin said. At a turnover rate of roughly two per year, the last person on the list could wait 30 years.

According to Tobin, the work that goes into each garden is immeasurable but the results are tangible. "Really, we eat from the garden from April when we can start harvesting lettuce right through to Thanksgiving when we have the Brussels sprouts."

As the town continues its internal look at a potential municipal purchase of the land, Tobin said he hopes that the gardens are included in that vision. The gardeners contribute four grocery bags worth of produce to the Wellesley Food Pantry every week, and at the Tobin table nearly all of their meals—when combined with community agriculture—are locally sourced.

The North 40 gardeners have been told they can plant at least one more time, with potential buyers already made aware of the college's commitment to the area, but the future beyond then for plot 29 and the rest is anyone's guess.



Above, Last Saturday, more than 100 people visited the North 40 for guided tours of the open space and a chance to meet the gardeners who have plots along the Weston Road side of the Wellesley-College-owned property.



Top, Mary Jo Tecce (left) and Joan Jones admire a bouquet from Tecce's garden at a big parcel of undeveloped land called the North 40 on



Below, Molly Pickett tends to her plot.