News
EarthBeat
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Fr. Benny Chittilappilly stands in his garden plot in Newport, Vermont, May 25, 2023, before planting. For Chittilappilly, a Vocationist priest from southern India, gardening is about more than growing vegetables. (OSV News/Vermont Catholic/Cori Fugere Urban)

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For Fr. Benny Chittilappilly, a Vocationist priest from southern India, gardening is about more than growing vegetables.

It's about time for meditation, about stress relief and about better relating to parishioners in Vermont's rural Northeast Kingdom, an area that covers over 2,000 square miles of some of the state's most scenic and undisturbed locations.

A parochial vicar for Mater Dei Parish in Newport, Derby Line and Island Pond, Chittilappilly first planted a garden behind St. Mary Star of the Sea Church in Newport two years ago, expanding it from the small raised bed that had been planted before.

He now has eight raised beds and a step garden to make more productive use of the space surrounded by fencing. Parishioners helped him make the beds and fence and even give him seeds and plants.

This year he planted tomatoes, cucumbers, okra, dill, turnip, string beans, garlic, onions, cauliflower, cabbage, brussel sprouts, lettuce, hot peppers and red and green Indian spinach.

He never showed an interest in his brother's vegetable garden at home in India, but he wanted to grow food for use at the Newport rectory where he lives with two other members of the Society of Divine Vocations. He does give away some of the produce — mostly tomatoes and string beans. "The okra nobody wants," he said with a smile.

The turnip, dill and brussel sprouts are new to him. "Except the dill, I like everything I grow," Chittilappilly told Vermont Catholic, the official publication of the Diocese of Burlington. "I grow basically what I like."

Not a professional gardener, "I'm just learning," said the priest who had a small container garden — using pots from Christmas and Easter flowers — at a parish he used to serve in New Jersey.

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He gets helpful tips from the internet and from parishioners.

Gardening, Chittilappilly said, helps him better understand his parishioners who farm and garden and sometimes struggle with the weather. Though he might like to wish for all pleasant, sunny days, he knows farmers and gardeners need rain for their crops. "I understand the effort people take to make a living (farming), and it depends on the weather," he said.

Now he empathizes with parishioners when it's not a good growing year.

He also understands the need for planning.

Once he planted all his seeds without marking which were which, so when the plants began to grow, he did not know which grew where.

The first year of his garden, he wanted to maximize the amount of produce in the space he had, so he planted his plants close together; they were too close and the result was a poor harvest. "I realized my mistake. I should have spaced them out," Chittilappilly said, likening too many plants to too many parish programs. "Sometimes in our ministry we bombard people with too much, but it doesn't produce anything. … We need to space (the programs) out."

Gardening also helps the young priest better understand the parables of Jesus, who often used examples from nature to make a point — seeds, weeds, pruning.

"However we try, there are certain things we need to depend on God for — sunshine, rain," he said. "Whatever we try is good but may not produce what we are looking for. We need God's grace to add to the effort."

Nature offers many lessons, and "even a small garden gives me the opportunity to think about life and meditate upon it," said Chittilappilly, for whom gardening is more than a hobby; it's an opportunity for spiritual reflection.