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Friday, Jul 18, 2003

On Pen

Posted on Fri, Jul. 18, 2003

The Mercury News

SWEET HARVEST

By S.L. Wykes
Mercury News

Call Joni Diserens plum proficient and you'd be right.

Not so many years after a friend dragged her to a master gardening class, Diserens is heading up a non-profit harvesting project that's diverted tens of thousands of pounds of going-to-waste Silicon Valley fruit to local food banks.

Diserens' Village Harvest volunteers pick fruit and take in excess from tree owners, but some of that fruit is too ripe for transport. Diserens, whose Hawaiian childhood included making fruit preserves, did the only logical thing. With a cadre of seasoned jammers behind her, she organized Village Harvest preserves.

After each harvest, whether it be lemons or kumquats or plums, the Village Harvest cooks stir together small batches of marmalades, jams, syrups and butters. Each batch's flavor is unique to the fruit picked from a specific place on a particular day. And no more sugar -- if any -- is added than absolutely necessary.

This Saturday, the "epi-curious" may sample those preserves at the Common Ground store in Palo Alto and discover what happens when serendipity meets skill.

In this valley, once lush with orchards, Village Harvest's volunteers have found not only the expected -- apricots,

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lemons, oranges and plums -- but the unexpected, too: loquats, figs, guavas and quince.

Sometimes they find trees obviously planted. Others have grown in wild, and like the grapes for high quality wines, fruit flavor is influenced by where the plants grow.

``We're not always exactly sure what they are," Diserens said, ``but they're delightful and they're treasures."

As much as Diserens likes the idea of introducing people to the wonders of pippin apple chutney and Meyer lemon marmalade, she is quick to list Village Harvest's broader goals.

``We are really working in service of trying to get more food for the hungry," she said. ``There's so much food that's not being used, and we live in this valley that's so productive. Even neglected fruit trees give 300 pounds of fruit a harvest -- that's average."

In just three years, focusing on trees in back yards from pocket to gentleman-farmer size, Village Harvest has grown from a first year collection of 5,000 pounds to this year's 50,000 pounds -- and still counting.

Many of those who call for harvest help are older homeowners overwhelmed by the amount of fruit their trees produce and how much care they need. Diserens tells about a peach tree, pruned beautifully for years and producing well, that will continue on because its owners, physically pressed to handle it, can count on Village Harvest's help.

And it could do even more, Diserens said, with a bit more help. Jam sales will augment the group's assets. And plentiful volunteers come to Village Harvest from all professions and of many ages, Diserens said, but they all need equipment: gloves, ladders, tarps and tree shakers.

So do the jammers: stock pots, canning racks, pressure canner. If they could find a commercial canning kitchen and a temperature-controlled storage unit, they could store inventory.

Diserens has become an expert in truck sizes, too. ``A couple of thousand pounds of fruit is more than you can fit into a car trunk!"

Projects such as Geri Speiler's trees call for large-scale hauling to share what is a sizable community resource. Speiler's Palo Alto home is on a double lot -- with 16 fruit trees, one a 50-footer considered to be the Peninsula's largest pear tree.

``I looked at these trees and said, `I'm a steward,' " recalled Speiler. She read, she took classes, she hired experienced fruit tree pruners -- and she had fruit. ``And how could I let it fall to the ground and die?"

Speiler started calling food pantries, and she fed her friends. ``Every neighbor and everyone I knew got fruit," she said. ``Every place I went it was, `Here comes Geri with another bag of fruit!' "

When she learned about Village Harvest, she was ecstatic. ``They didn't hear the end of me. They were a godsend."

She even bought them equipment to help the job along.



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