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Davis Enterprise, The (CA)

Village Harvest

Davis branch of nonprofit collects excess fruit from residents, feeds hungry

Michael Stepanov

Enterprise correspondent

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When President Obama asked the American public to lend a hand to help ease the difficult times our country is facing, many answered. One way the people of Davis have responded is through Village Harvest.

Last October, Joe Schwartz read an article in The Enterprise that introduced him to this group, and, with a high sense of "volunteer spirit," he began organizing an effort to harvest the extra fruit from the trees in Davis.

Village Harvest is a volunteer-based nonprofit organization that captures the excess fruit people have on their trees. They harvest the fruit and then donate it to local charities.

It was established in 2001 in San Jose and has grown to more than 430 volunteers and has harvested 122,000 pounds of wholesome fruit. Since beginning in March, the Davis branch has drawn 25 volunteers and has already harvested 1,000 pounds of fruit.

Volunteers Greg and Pam Gibbs are two Davisites working with Village Harvest. "The organization has a great idea — people can do great things with what they think is sure to make a mess," said Greg Gibbs, about how people often let fruit go to waste.

Covered with liability insurance in case an accident occurs, Village Harvest travels to the trees in need of harvesting with their own equipment. They will then cull the fruit and the homeowner decides how much of the fruit they would like to enjoy for themselves. With the edible fruit remaining, Village Harvest delivers it to the Short-Term Emergency Aid Committee and Davis Community Meals.

"I am overwhelmed with joy that we can bring fruit to families who are reduced to a less nutritious diet," Schwartz said. Recently, Village Harvest collected 78 pounds of cherries in one harvest. "Getting to the trees might be the biggest challenge. The window of opportunity is generally not very big if we hope to collect fresh, ripe fruit."

His team has an ambitious goal of harvesting 30,000 pounds of fruit annually. "Because of the positive response we have gotten from the community in our first couple months, we are convinced that we can exceed the expectations," Schwartz said.

Gibbs added, "When people become aware of the program, it will snowball by word of mouth. We are promoting a healthy lifestyle with the charitable contributions we make."

Gibbs' prediction seems likely, since Village Harvest benefits everyone involved. Those in need of important nutrients have been enjoying plums, oranges, cherries, apricots, lemons and grapefruits. The volunteers enjoy good exercise and social time. And the tree owner gets a clean yard — in addition to a tax deduction, since Village Harvest is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit agency. To make the deal even better, the owner of the fruit gets to decide the value of the harvest.

Every piece of fruit is used. If Village Harvest believes the fruit is not appropriate to distribute in meal packages, it will be made into jam or used for compost.

Biz Gibbs, Greg's sister, who is visiting from England, was impressed. "The idea is very progressive, but it wouldn't be as successful in England because the fruit grown there is more seasonal," she said.

Will Benware from STEAC explained that the fruit is divided and packaged up in bags of 1 to 1.5 pounds. "Village Harvest has been a huge bonus for our cause. All the families are grateful to see fresh fruit in their packages. Without Village Harvest, the members of our program are restricted only to processed fruit."

Every month a family is eligible for a package of food that is meant to last five days. STEAC creates a standard list depending on the size of the family and lets them choose the fruit, alongside a variety of other staples.

"Occasionally, some of the families are addicted to the processed fruit, which shows how significant these donations are," Benware said.

In Davis, with such bountiful agriculture all around, Village Harvest has a good chance of helping a large number of people who struggle to get vitamins and minerals in their daily diet. This success relies on the residents of Davis who have unused fruit in their back yards and are willing to give alms. It is a program endorsing a sustainable method of using the resources from local sources.

Anyone who has trees needing harvesting or who would like to volunteer may contact the Davis branch of Village Harvest at (530) 759-9792 or visit <http://www.villageharvest.org>. Village Harvest welcomes donations of any kind to help continue its operations.

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