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Good Neighbor Gardens: Your yard can help feed the needy

By Holly Hayes
Mercury News

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In a few hours one day last month, volunteers picked a whopping 1,807 pounds of grapefruit from a huge, 50-year-old tree in the back yard of Janice Marklein's home in the Cambrian area of San Jose. The fruit was trucked to the Second Harvest Food Bank, where it helped supplement food donations to hundreds of low-income individuals and families.

At the Almost Eden Garden Project in Palo Alto, 40 to 100 pounds of fresh produce is tended, picked and delivered each week to three agencies that serve the hungry on the Peninsula.

And at Holy Spirit School in San Jose, the kindergarten classes have completed the final harvest of their little garden, yielding two bags full of veggies and herbs for Second Harvest.

Today, the Mercury News launches a program to encourage similar efforts in our community to grow and harvest locally grown fruits and vegetables to help those who are struggling to put food on the table. We're calling it the Good Neighbor Gardens project.

Just imagine what a difference it would make in the local hunger situation if everyone grew a little extra in their gardens to share.

The idea isn't new to a lot of you. For the past 10 years, hundreds of home gardeners have participated in Plant a Row for the Hungry, an international program to provide fresh produce to local food pantries. Since it was started here in 1995, local green thumbs have donated and/or gleaned more than 1.3 million pounds -- a staggering number that has set a national benchmark.

This year, we're putting our local stamp on the effort, with a new name and logo we hope will encourage even more people to get involved. We'll even help you get started by sending you a free starter kit with seeds (see information at the end of this story for how to get one).

Since January of this year, 92,566 pounds of fruits and vegetables have been weighed in as donations at Second Harvest. Much of this has come from organized gleaning efforts, but home and school gardeners have been pitching in enthusiastically, too. So we're already off to a rousing 2005.

"Our volunteers are just astounded at how much fruit comes off one tree and how much of a difference it makes," says Joni Diserens, executive director of Village Harvest, the non-profit organization that coordinated the gleaning at Marklein's house. With last month's haul, the total off *that one grapefruit tree* over the past four years comes to an eye-popping 5,849 pounds of fruit.

"By my calculations, that's 15,600 servings -- a good party for a small town," says Diserens -- or a week's worth of fruit for 185 families of four.

But you don't need a gargantuan grapefruit tree to help. Good Neighbor Gardens can be large or small, in sprawling suburban yards or in containers on city patios and balconies. All it takes is a few seeds or maybe an extra six-pack of vegetable seedlings and a sunny spot. You add water, a little fertilizer and your good intentions.

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What's needed? Everything, but especially fruits and vegetables that don't bruise easily. Harvest before things get too ripe so that local agencies can turn around your donation before it spoils. (In other words, pick those plums, persimmons and tomatoes when they're still hard.)

At Holy Spirit School, the kindergartners reaped onions, leeks, chard, kale, carrots, radishes, green beans and fingerling potatoes. They also harvested rosemary, sage, cilantro and parsley.

Most of the produce was grown in the school garden, but some came from families who planted veggies at home. Seeds and assistance were provided by the Master Gardeners of Santa Clara County.

"The whole thing was such a great experience," says parent Jeanne Dominguez. "The kids could really grasp the concept of helping to feed hungry families. At harvest time, they were so excited about pulling carrots and spinach out of the ground."

At the all-organic Almost Eden Garden Project in Palo Alto, the focus is on growing crops that are high in nutritional value (collards, kale chard, green beans, etc.) and on crops that do not require cooking facilities to prepare (tomatoes, cucumbers, snap peas, etc.).


"Bay Area food pantries struggle to provide nutritious food for the local homeless and low-income population," says Pamela Chesavage, co-manager of the garden.


Almost Eden's weekly harvest goes to help Urban Ministries in Palo Alto, Bread of Life Ministries in East Palo Alto and the South Palo Alto Food Closet. In addition, low-income individuals who help out in the garden can take home bags of fresh produce.

Chesavage, a recently minted Master Gardener, plans a series of free garden classes to help people learn the basics, or just get reinvigorated for the start of the summer growing season. The first will be 9 to 11 a.m. June 11 and will cover basic organic gardening practices (no need to preregister; just show up at the garden, 701 E. Meadow Drive, Palo Alto).

Interested in participating in Good Neighbor Gardens? It's as simple as requesting a free starter kit, which contains seeds, a list of community drop-off locations and a little refrigerator magnet that will tell your friends what you're up to. Please send your name and mailing address to Good Neighbor Gardens, San Jose Mercury News, 750 Ridder Park Drive, San Jose, Calif. 95190; or send e-mail to features@mercurynews.com.

Contact Holly Hayes at hhayes@mercurynews.com or (408) 920-5374.

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