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Gardens Grow Community Spirit and Feed Those in Need

By Meredith Shea Barnes

//Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” – Chinese Proverb

Familiar to the point of cliché, maybe, but what about swapping a few new words in? What about giving a woman a shovel? Or a man a pack of seeds? Some local organizations are trying out these variations on the old proverb by creating and fostering charitable community gardens within walking distance of Charlottesville’s Downtown Mall.

Charitable community gardens offer the opportunity to donate sweat equity, give or gain a little garden knowledge and build community, while growing farm-fresh produce for the growing population of locals who can’t afford to put the next meal, let alone the next healthy meal, on the table. The poor economy and spiraling fuel prices cause grocery sticker shock for all of us and can make putting food on the table a daily struggle for many in our community. Pound for pound, fresh produce is much more expensive than processed and fast foods and is difficult to prepare if you don’t have access to a kitchen.

At the same time, Charlottesville has seen a strong interest in “buying local” and in back-yard gardening and area nonprofits have sought creative ways to share the bounty. Many churches traditionally hold “gleanings” at harvest time, picking and donating extra produce from area gardens to local shelters and food banks. Last year the Jefferson Area Board on Aging procured a grant that gives holders of government food assistance cards double credit to buy fresh fruits and vegetables at the Saturday City Market on Water Street.

The Thomas Jefferson Area Coalition for the Homeless, or TJACH, and the Quality Community Council, or QCC, are capitalizing on both trends with community gardens that are maintained by and serve members of the wider community with practical gardening knowledge, fellowship, and, of course, very local produce.

TJACH’s Haven, housed in the First Street Church off the mall, serves between 20 and 60 breakfasts per day—depending on the season. The homeless and the very poor who come to the Haven get a hot breakfast and access to showers, laundry facilities and connections with needed social services. From the



PATCH garden, courtesy photo

beginning Haven staff wanted to make both local produce and the wider community part of the daily routine of the day shelter. When a local developer offered the use of a 2-acre lot near the Oakwood Cemetery, TJACH staff and volunteers saw an opportunity to do both.

Early last spring, shelter guests, staff and volunteers, skilled and novice, turned the empty lot into a garden PATCH. PATCH stands for Partners Allied in Teaching Community Horticulture. Members of the Building Goodness Foundation contributed a storage shed, and a hive of bees took up residence and began producing honey while pollinating the growing plants. Virginia’s own Southern Exposure Seed Exchange donated seeds. In its inaugural summer, the PATCH garden provided the Haven community with Swiss chard, cucumbers and tomatoes while providing clients and volunteers with valuable garden knowledge. Those who came to dig, weed, tend and harvest left with training in compost and soil building, seed basics and some very fresh produce.

Additionally, kitchen manager Lena Zentgraf used the brand-new Haven kitchen to teach kitchen safety and sanitation, knife skills, canning and preserving and foundational cooking classes for shelter guests and volunteers. Such training can give jobless locals a better chance at finding a job in the area’s growing hospitality industry.

Says Zentgraf, “Part of PATCH’s mission is to get clients and volunteers together to produce whatever is possible. We want

volunteers to know our clients and to work side-by-side with them. Working in the garden is a much more intimate experience than dropping off donations or working at the desk, and we think it's good for everyone."

Guinevere Higgins and Mike Parisi of Blue Ridge Backyard Harvest, a company which teaches people how to farm in small spaces, will take over the challenging role of managing the garden this year. Higgins is eagerly planning the 2011 crop of potatoes, onions, carrots, tomatoes and other fixings for omelets and breakfast burritos. She's also excited about the flowers that will attract pollinators and brightening the public spaces at the Haven. Higgins and Parisi will offer a series of garden education workshops free of charge but with a suggested donation that goes back into the garden fund. Higgins also sees the garden as an important means of attracting new volunteers. "The PATCH garden offers a safe and fun way for families who might not think of volunteering in the shelter space to contribute," she says.

QCC's Garden of Goodness at the corner of Monticello Avenue and 6th Street turns heads with its lush display of corn, squash and greens. Full-time QCC farmer Todd Neimier works with residents of under-served communities and volunteers to select and order seeds and to plant, maintain and harvest the

crops at the flagship of the QCC Farms! Program. The community organizing group, which has been working in low-wealth Charlottesville neighborhoods since 1993, recently installed a raised vegetable bed behind the Barrett Early Learning Center on Ridge Street and started QCC Farms! West on West Street in the 10th and Page neighborhood. Volunteers who help out during scheduled weekly work days are "paid" in tokens redeemable for produce at the Garden's "market day" every Friday afternoon in season.

QCC also has also partnered with University of Virginia Nutrition Services to offer QCC Cooks!—free cooking classes using garden produce. Last year's topics ranged from "Kamikaze Vegetables—Sneaking Fruits and Veggies into Your Kid's Diet!" to "Southern Dishes the Healthy Way." All QCC classes are open to the public.

For More Information or to Volunteer:

The PATCH Garden
www.thehavenatfirstandmarket.org

QCC Farms!
<http://cvilleqcc.com/Farm.aspx>



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