

## Almost a ton of produce for the needy

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Tom Lang, volunteer and master gardener, looks over the the Monmouth County Agriculture Building vegetable garden in October. (STAFF PHOTOS: MICHAEL SYPNIEWSKI)



### GARDEN FOOD FOR THE NEEDY

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The 50-foot by 50-foot, fenced-in plot sits dormant, covered in earthy tones of brown and tan. But its size and present colors are deceiving, masking the lush greens and its productivity when this garden was in full force in warmer weather. The final count is in and the garden, operated by the Monmouth County Master Gardeners Class of 2008, produced 1,737 pounds of vegetables and herbs for the needy in the western part of the county.

"Wow!" said Jeanne Yaecker, executive director of the Freehold Area Open Door food pantry, which received the garden harvests. "I didn't know it was that high." But Yaecker knew the garden — which sits behind the Monmouth County Agriculture Building on Kozloski Road in Freehold Township — was special. From early May to early November, depending on what was ready to be harvested, the garden produced such crops as tomato, pepper, cabbage, cucumber, squash, bean, lettuce, pea, potato, eggplant, kale, broccoli and various herbs. "Great variety," Yaecker said. "The clients were thrilled to have it."

The master gardener program is now in its 10th year. To become certified as master gardeners, participants must take 60 hours of classroom horticulture training and volunteer 60 hours: 20 hours on the program's gardening help-line and another 40 in community service, such as harvesting the garden for Open Door. The master gardeners created the garden and began donating the harvest to Open Door in 2006 as part of the national "Plant a Row for the Hungry" project, created by the Garden Writers Association of America. Open Door, for example, serves Freehold Borough, Freehold Township, Millstone Township, Marlboro and Colts Neck. In October, the last month from which figures were available, Open Door served 437 households with 1,200 people, up about 35 percent from last year, Yaecker said. For Thanksgiving, Open Door prepared 500 dinners, compared with an estimated 400 last year, Yaecker said. "It, definitely, can be linked to the economy," Yaecker said. "We were running out of food a lot faster," Yaecker said. "(But) we didn't turn anyone away. We asked people if they could wait a few days (before picking up food). The food seemed to fly from the shelves." The garden produced 1,600 pounds in 2006 and 1,450 pounds in 2007.

"I loved this class," said Diane C. Zahorsky, who has overseen the master gardener program since it began in 1999. "They were the most involved in the PAR (Plant a Row) garden. But the two previous classes really set the groundwork."

This year, the gardeners had a goal of 2,000 pounds. "Farmer Tom" Lang, a member of the 2006 class and mentor to the 2007 and 2008 classes, said he thought the goal came up when a participant had an idea, "Let's get a ton of food." Lang noted the group encountered a dry spring and other weather problems. "I didn't think they would even get to 1,500 (pounds)," Lang said. "I thought if they got 1,500 it would be a great year." Carolyn Heuser, a member of the 2008 class, also noted the gardeners battled a beetle that reduced the production of weighty cucumbers. But the 2008 class did something the previous two classes did not — adding colder-weather crops to the garden such as spinach, Swiss chard and beets. This year's class planted crops into August-September, whereas the two previous classes planted only to July, said Lang, 62, who lives in Ocean Township. This extended the season and increased productivity. "I think they do a real nice job of succession planting," Yaecker said. "They make the most of that piece of ground. And they love what they are doing." "I was very impressed with the amount of work they did and how they worked as a team and their dedication to the garden," said Zahorsky, horticulturist for the Rutgers University Cooperative Extension office in Freehold Township. "They communicated very well as a class." Of the 28 in the class, about 20 were active with the garden, Zahorsky said.

Some spinach plants remain in the garden and should be available for harvesting in the spring, assuming the winter is not extremely cold, said Heuser, 67, who lives in Freehold Township. "It wouldn't be a lot (more in pounds)," Heuser said. "Five, 10 pounds," Lang said. But Heuser added, "To me, it really wasn't about the pounds. It was about the quality." "Everything they brought was absolutely beautiful and first-rate quality," Yaecker said. Heuser, who volunteers for Open Door, said she "thought it was great" that the garden generated food for Open Door. "It gives me a good feeling, knowing you can help somebody out," Lang said. Heuser said home gardens can donate their harvests to Open Door. Lang's approximately 8-foot by 15-foot garden serves his home, with extra for his neighbors. "You get so many vegetables out of it, more than one family can use," Lang said. Anyone interested in starting a home garden can contact the master gardener program, Heuser said.

The various county master gardener classes recently donated at least eight bags of paper goods — paper plates, napkins, drinking cups — to Open Door, Zahorsky said. The goods, according to Yaecker, are for Open Door's lunch program, which serves the needy four days a week. "So, they (master gardeners) continue to give," Zahorsky said.

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