

## NATURE'S NURTURE



### Master gardeners' bounty feeds the hungry

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FREEHOLD BUREAU



Master Gardeners volunteer their time in a 40-foot garden that supplies food for the needy. Joe Martino (left, red hat) of Aberdeen, Diane Zahorsky (center), Monmouth County horticulturist, and Tom Lang of Oakhurst pick string beans from the garden in Freehold Township. Photo Dave May

"Lots of vegetables today," Jeanne Yaecker, executive director of Freehold Area Open Door, tells a woman entering the agency's food pantry.

"Good, that's what I want," replies the woman, who picks up a few bags of groceries and then rushes out the door onto Throckmorton Street.

This summer, for the first time, many of the vegetables supplied to needy people at the food pantry are grown in a garden plot behind the Monmouth County Agricultural Building on Kozloski Road in nearby Freehold Township.

"It feels good to do something you love and benefit somebody," said Alison Ruff, 50, a Tinton Falls homemaker who recently worked the small (40 feet by 50 feet), but productive (more than 100 pounds of vegetables a week) plot of land.



"We're helping people that could use food," said John Costello, 40, a Howell optometrist professionally and a gardener hobbyist at his Wall home.

The garden is the work of the Monmouth County Master Gardeners, a program in its eighth year that is run by the Rutgers University Cooperative Extension in cooperation with the county government. It provides 60 hours of classroom horticulture training to 30 people who receive a certificate upon completion, said Diane Zahorsky, the extension's home horticulturist.

Then, they must volunteer 60 hours in such ways as speaking to the public about gardening, or, for the first time this year, helping to feed the hungry through the national "Plant a Row for the Hungry" project created by the Garden Writers Association of America in 1995.

"It encourages people to plant an extra row in their gardens and donate that produce," Zahorsky said.

"This is a nice project," said gardener Howard Bodner, 66, of Middletown, a retired Bell Labs electrical engineer. "It has a good aim."

The garden's harvest has included squash, cucumbers, radishes, eggplant, cabbage, herbs, peppers, tomatillos, beans and tomatoes.

On a recent day, Open Door distributed bags of produce, a combination harvest from the master gardeners and a donation from Battleview Orchards in Freehold Township.

"For lunch, I'll make a salad," said Claudio Urena, 53, of Freehold, as he picked up a bag of cabbage, radishes and squash at Open Door. Urena, a cook, was out of work because of an injured arm. So he picked up food at Open Door.

The produce is "great, delicious," Urena said.

Open Door supplies three days' worth of food for home use to 350 families a month, along with feeding 150 people lunches during the week, said Maureen Kurowski, an Open Door trustee.

Jasmine Rivera, 25, of Freehold, also picked up produce at Open Door. Rivera, commenting through a Spanish translator, said the produce will help feed her and four others in her home.



"Vegetables are good for health — clean the stomach," said Shafik Rhmn, 45, of Freehold, as he picked up produce.

"Nutritionally, fresh fruits and vegetables are the best," Yaecker said.

With the gardeners harvesting on Mondays and Thursdays, their nine harvests so far have produced 510 pounds of vegetables for the Open Door pantry.

"This garden is just going nuts," said Ruff, marveling at the output. "It's so prolific. I was just pleasantly surprised."

Kurowski, a 2002 graduate of the master gardening class, approached Zahorsky about the program early this year, seeking to get the master gardeners involved through their home gardens, Zahorsky said. But it tied into a plan Zahorsky had for a grassy area behind the county Agricultural Building, which the cooperative extension moved into in 2004.

"I looked in the back and saw gardens," Zahorsky said. "That was my goal, to put educational gardens there."

So, when Kurowski brought the Plant-a-Row idea to her, "I thought, let's just do one big garden here," Zahorsky said.

The master gardeners began preparing the garden in early June, planting in mid-June and harvesting vegetables in early July, Zahorsky said.

"This was all farmland," Zahorsky said. "So the soil is pretty good."

Despite attacks by vine borers and potato beetles, very little pesticide has been used. So, for the most part, the garden is organic. With the small plot and large number of volunteers — 18 involved in the garden from the class of 30 — "it's easy to be organic," with gardeners being able to pull pests off plants, Costello said.

On a recent day, a half-dozen master gardeners bent, knelt and lifted. They were watering, weeding and harvesting the neat, marked rows.

"I like the idea (of helping the needy)," said "Farmer Tom" Lang, 59, a retired plumber-pipefitter from Ocean Township. "I think it's great.

"I'd plant stuff and give it to the neighborhood," said Lang, given his "Farmer Tom" nickname by fellow gardeners because of his usual garb — straw hat, jeans and long-sleeve shirt — to ward off the hot summer sun. "(But) the needy is the way to go."

The Plant-a-Row garden is the first all-class project in the eight years of the master gardener program, Zahorsky said. "It really brought the class together," she said.

This is the first year Freehold Area Open Door has been involved with Plant-a-Row, Kurowski said.

"It was all beautiful," said Yaecker, speaking of the master gardener's harvest. "it's such a great help. It turns out to be a bonus for our families. It's nice to take advantage of it while we have it."

Although others can - and do - bring in produce to Open Door's Freehold office, only the master gardeners are formally involved in Open Door's Plant-a-Row project, Kurowski said.

"We'll take it (the master gardeners' produce) whenever they want to bring it," Yaecker said.

"Besides getting (required) volunteer time, it's also been a good education," Zahorsky said. "Some have never started a garden from scratch."

And it has been fun.

"I like the people aspect," Bodner said. "There's a great group of people here."

"I've been gardening for 20 years or so," Ruff said. "I like vegetable gardening, perennial gardening. I like getting in the dirt, getting my hands dirty."

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