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Organic gardens yield harvest of well-being

Families, homeless learn marketable skills

BY ZACHARY B. THACHER
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On a recent Saturday, while other kids were home watching cartoons, Jesus Vasquez and his friends labored happily in a garden all their own, planting garlic and reaping lettuce, peppers and eggplant. And that night, diners at Menlo Park's exclusive organic restaurant, Flea Street Cafe, enjoyed the children's harvest.

At the East Palo Alto Community Garden on Weeks Street, the children are part of an urban experiment in organic entrepreneurship that teaches them how to cultivate their own food, eat well and make a little money to pay for such activities as martial arts classes and an occasional trip to the bowling alley.

Across the freeway in Palo Alto, Thea Burr and other homeless people broke ground at a garden of their own — the Homeless Garden Project — where they will also learn the art of successful gardening and entrepreneurship.

Together, the folks at both gardens are hoping to cooperate to increase their success and share their experience and labor. The Urban Ministry, a charitable group from Palo Alto, organizes and funds the Homeless Garden Project, and Bay Area Action, an environmental organization, manages the East Palo Alto Community Garden.

“We see ourselves as part of the same phenomenon of sustainable urban gardening,” said Tom Pirkle, the Urban Ministry director of the Homeless Garden Project.

Disdaining pesticides

“What we're trying to do is form a consortium of urban gardeners in the area, including East Palo Alto,” Pirkle said.

Cooperation among activist gardeners in both cities is one instance of the sustainable agriculture movement's newfound popularity. Similar farming projects that disdain the use of pesticides and artificial fertilizers are thriving throughout California, the Midwest and the east coast.

At the Homeless Garden Project in Palo Alto, three homeless people are employed for \$6 an hour by the Urban Ministry to double-dig seed beds down to 24 inches. The money they earn can

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be safe-guarded in a trust fund maintained by the Urban Ministry, a church-based organization that serves 4,300 poor and homeless annually. The garden is modeled after the successful 6-year-old Santa Cruz Homeless Garden Project, which employs 20 homeless people and seven low-income staff members.

After vigorous lobbying by Tom Pirkle and Palo Alto human services administrator David Martin, the Palo Alto City Council

authorized the garden in October and donated a \$3,000 water main while promising to cover water bills indefinitely. Now that everything is in place, the homeless are building a garden.

“This is wonderful,” said Thea Burr as she shoveled rich, dark manure out of the back of a pickup truck, which will then be mixed with compost soil in the beds.

The garden is teaching her how to work with others after her solitary experiences as a homeless woman. “If you can work in a group setting, you can work for anybody,” she said.

Pirkle said that the garden is designed to grow food organically, which the homeless will eat and sell to local restaurants and community members.

“It is a way to empower homeless and marginalized folks economically,” he said. “Working for four to five dollars an hour at menial jobs is just not going to do it.”

Learn organic methods

Organic bio-intensive methods, like hand-irrigating and avoiding chemical fertilizers and pesticides, achieve two goals at the Homeless Garden Project and East Palo Alto Community Gardens. The planting method improves the soil and makes it sustainable, meaning that the same land can be used repeatedly to produce robust crops. Second, the work is labor-intensive, providing more work for the homeless — and giving the kids time to learn how to grow food.

The community garden on Weeks Street in East Palo Alto used to be trash-filled lot before the East Palo Alto Historical and Agricultural Society and Bay Area Action started it three summers ago. Since then, the land has grown in size and scope. It is split



into two sides, one tended by 14 families on individual plots and the other by 18 neighborhood children.

“I see them all working together, and it's really great,” said a Weeks Street neighbor, Earline Green.

The family garden operates summer and fall projects, said Denise Ladwig, the Bay Area Action director for the gardens. In June she helped create the children's garden, a year-round project of planting, reaping and profit-making. So far, they've been able to sell on a very small scale at the local flea market and to the Flea Street Cafe, Menlo Park's upscale organic produce restaurant.

Weeks Street is lined with small houses, some neat and trim, others ramshackle and in need of paint. The Open Bible Baptist Church faces the gardens; gang graffiti mars the walls of an abandoned building that forms the garden's back wall. On the

garden's north side, another wall is brightly colored with children's murals and the garden's name *Jardin de comunidad* in Spanish and the Community Garden in English.

Since Ladwig organized volunteers and local children, mostly from a Bay Road apartment complex, to clean up the heavily littered lot last summer and start the kids' garden, she has noticed that drug dealers have left the area.

Healthier atmosphere

“It's created a whole different feel for what goes on there — doesn't attract that kind of activity anymore,” she said. In fact she is considering opening the gardens to some of the neighborhood's troubled teens.

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Ladwig said. They are mostly lower-income Hispanic families.

"What became evident was that these families were really impoverished, so we sold tools for \$5 each or gave them away," said Ladwig, after they had given them rent-free plots. She said one family using the garden could only afford a diet of beans and rice; the plot they cultivated came to be their only source for fresh vegetables.

One recent Saturday Ladwig was instructing 10 children how to irrigate the garden properly as they picked lettuce leaves, curved chilies and eggplants. Ladwig had them gather the tail ends of a fall crop that afternoon to sell to the Flea Street Cafe.

"Oh, sweet!" said one of the children, Juan Barron, as he pulled peas off a small plant and ate them.

As the kids munched on the vegetables they were collecting,

Dwayne Bosse, head chef at Flea Street Cafe, drove up. He walked around the small garden, admiring the thriving vegetables and then piled the overflowing boxes of fresh produce into his car. The chilies would be used for fresh soups, the baby eggplants for harvest pies and several varieties of lettuce would go into salads. He ended up paying \$76 for five cases of vegetables.

Jays of the season

"Seasonal stuff is so much more flavorful than things you buy conventionally," Bosse said as the children gathered around him. Later that day, Bosse took the kids to Flea Street for a tour of the kitchen. A week later, Bosse took 14 kids back to the restaurant and taught them how to make individual pizzas using their own fresh produce.

"We had a really good time," Bosse said. "I'd love to have them back in to do something else."

Ricki Navas, Jesus Vasquez, Mari-bel Sanchez and Salvador Martinez cluster around Denise Ludwig as they pack produce, above left, in the East Palo Alto Community Garden on Weeks Street. Above right, Jesus, 12, harvests lettuce. At right, William Randolph waters seed at the Palo Alto Homeless Garden Project. Both gardens reflect values of the sustainable agriculture movement, disdaining the use of pesticides and artificial fertilizers.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY
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