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Urban Garden Blossoms

Green space brings neighbors together in East P.A.

By Savannah Blackwell
Special to The Chronicle

A wooden fence painted with the words: "Jardin de la Comunidad," "Peace" and "Diversity" provides the backdrop as about a dozen children dig holes for winter seedlings, yank weeds from the earth and pluck corn from sky-high stalks.

They are working in East Palo Alto's Weeks Street Community Garden, a former dump site that attracted drug-dealing activity. The children, mostly from Mexico and El Salvador, laugh and play as they learn the techniques that bring home the organically grown squash, tomatoes and chili peppers.

"It looks beautiful now," said 10-year-old Evelyn Navas. "It's fun, and I like to help. We're learning how to get plants into the ground and out."

Evelyn, her older sister, Yasmine, and brother Ricky are part of an effort by 13 Hispanic families to farm individual plots and one communal area that comprise nearly two acres. In its third year, the garden — a project of two local environmental groups, Bay Area Action and the East Palo Alto Historical and Agricultural Society — has enriched the lives of the children and their families and the larger Weeks Street community. Moreover, it speaks to East Palo Alto's agricultural roots.

The children provided the spark for the project and remain its primary focus, Bay Ar-

ea Action officials say.

The project started when Bay Area Action member Jim Steinmetz asked his father, Gerald, if he could clean up a piece of land that his father owned on Weeks Street and turn it into a garden. As he was working on it, children from the rundown, overcrowded apartment complex next door flocked around him and begged to pick up hoes and shovels and help out. Their enthusiasm became the inspiration for a community garden.

The local community pitched in. Nurseries donated starter plants, neighbors loaned tools and trash collection companies provided dumpsters. Then the owner of an adjacent plot, Syrtiller Kabat, agreed to let the children use her land for free, too.

"People have a sense inside them that this is a good thing," said Denise Ladwig, who works for Bay Area Action and teaches the children how to farm. "There's something very deep and profound that (working the) earth offers."

The garden gives the children much-needed green space to play. Evelyn told how earlier, her father didn't want her near the dump site or the drug dealers who loitered there.

"My dad wouldn't let me come over here," Evelyn said. "People made messes and were doing bad stuff."

Now she has a lovely place to play and work

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with other children.

"We help each other over here," she said. "We've become more friendly to each other."

Ladwig believes that gardening benefits the children not only educationally but spiritually. "When we learn we are needed, it gives us a sense of worth," she said.

"What they learn is to take care of something," said Becka Prager, who works with troubled teens in urban garden projects for the San Francisco League of Urban Gardeners. "They're watching something blossom that they've created."

The children's parents are also pleased. "It's helped him a lot,"

said Silvia Lopez, whose 11-year-old son, Ricardo, works in the garden. "It's taught him responsibility."

Bay Area Action has also been providing other after-school activities for the children, who are mostly under 13. Ladwig has organized some karate classes, and members have shown the children how to work with wood and play drums. One weekend last month, the children got their faces painted at a fall festival in the garden. "We want to help support the kids in using their gifts," Ladwig said.

The children will also get a chance to be entrepreneurs.

Jesse Cool, owner of the Flea Street Cafe in Palo Alto, has said

*'There's something very deep and profound
that (working the) earth offers'*

— DENISE LADWIG, BAY AREA ACTION

Community Spirit Blossoms at East Palo Alto Plot



BY LIZ HAFALIA/THE CHRONICLE

Jasmine Navas, 6, and her brother, Kicky, 11, gather chiles at the Weeks Street garden

she will buy whatever vegetables the children want to sell and use them in her restaurant's salads and soups. She is also hoping to bring the children in to see their produce cooked and prepared and to enjoy the results.

The garden is also becoming the basis for a community outreach effort. On a recent Monday afternoon, Ladwig visited the children's mothers and, with the help of an interpreter, spoke with them not only about problems in the garden (produce is stolen on occasion), but other problems on their mind.

One mother was concerned that her children sometimes refuse to go to school because they are harassed by older children, and Ladwig offered to act as liaison with school officials. She hopes to hold monthly meetings with the families and bring in people who can help them with such things as attaining U.S. citizenship and learning English.

The garden's vegetables help the families lower their food bills. Ramona Garcia, an immigrant from Michoacan, Mexico, who has seven children and is pregnant with her eighth, said that without the garden, her family would not have any chili peppers, a staple of Mexican cuisine, because she couldn't afford them.

The garden provides peace of mind for the parents, too. Teresa Torres, a single working mother, says she no longer fears leaving her children unattended, because she knows where they are and that other mothers will keep an eye on them. "We work together better and have a better community," she

said.

Most of the parents grew up on farms, and having a plot to farm is key to their sense of independence. A strong tie to *la tierra*, the Earth, is part of the Latino tradition.

"We used to take (the children) out and hunt for cacahuets (peanuts)," said one of children's mothers, Maria Barron, whose family in Mexico are peanut farmers. "This provides a link between Mexican life and here."

A link with the land is part of East Palo Alto's history, too. Weeks Street is named for Charles Weeks, a local citizen who 60 years ago coined the phrase "one acre and independence."

Members of the East Palo Alto Historical and Agricultural Society, which contributed funds in the first two years of the garden project, see the garden as part of an effort to preserve agricultural space and the city's historic character. "It's a beginning," said Patricia Foster, a member of the historical society who works with the Weeks Street community.

Neighbors love the garden. Viola Atwater, who has lived on Weeks Street for 30 years, is glad the drug dealers are gone. "I can't believe the difference," she said. "It's such a nice thing to look out my window at, rather than trash and litter and vagrants with drugs. . . . I think people are really beginning to appreciate what's going on there."

■ Bay Area Action needs additional funds to reach its goal of continuing the garden year-round. For more information or to help, call (415) 321-1994 or send donations to 715 Colorado Avenue No. 1, Palo Alto 94303.