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## Grow Well, Do Good: Some Gardeners Donate Produce

**'Planting with a purpose': Veggie gardeners donate some of their yield**

**By MELISSA KOSSLER**

*The Associated Press*

At The Caring Kitchen in Delray Beach, Fla., which serves 7,100 meals a month on a \$600 budget, there isn't money for fresh produce.

The hunger relief program relies on food donations from local gardeners and others, said coordinator April Hazamy.

For the past two years, gardeners from nearby Cason United Methodist Church have contributed vegetables to the cause. The church asks participants in its community gardening program to donate 10 percent of their yield to The Caring Kitchen.

"Fresh produce is one of the things we're most in need of," Hazamy said. "It's huge to us. To have it for free is even better."

The idea of "planting with a purpose" is germinating around the country, said Michael Metallo, president of the National Gardening Association, headquartered in South Burlington, Vt. People interested in helping the hungry want to do more than offer leftovers, he said.

"There are more and more individuals around the country doing this," he said. "The idea being that anyone can make a contribution to the food bank."

The desire to act locally, eat healthier and preserve the environment is motivating gardeners and activists to grow fruits and vegetables, he said.

"There are a lot of reasons for this movement," Metallo said. "This generation is becoming more conscious of the need we have right in this country. It's a big social issue that this generation is trying to address."

The congregation at Sherwood Presbyterian Church in Sherwood, Ore., decided this year to turn its front yard into gardening plots for senior citizens, low-income families and others with a desire to grow their own produce.

"We're much more aware of individuals or families that are struggling," said Karen Sesnon, a garden co-coordinator. "We want to have a presence in our community."

A congregation member donated money to construct garden beds, and the church is renting them for \$20 for the season. The rent is meant to cover the cost of water, Sesnon said. Participants also can attend a series of classes and events associated with the program.

The church has asked the gardeners to donate 10 percent of their harvest to charity. Options include the local food bank, a senior citizen center and a school that collects food for the needy.

In Austin, Texas, needy families are eating organic produce grown by teenagers in a program designed to address community problems and create an awareness of social responsibility. Students in the Urban Roots program earn a stipend for working on a 3.5-acre farm that generates more than 20,000 pounds of produce. Forty percent of the harvest is donated to hunger relief agencies, soup kitchens and shelters, said Russell Smith, executive director of YouthLaunch, which oversees the program.

"Some of them don't get a lot of fresh produce," he said.

Procuring fresh produce is a challenge for food banks, agreed Kerri Qunell, spokeswoman for Capital Area Food Bank of Texas, in Austin. More and more organizations are working with grocery stores to salvage produce before it gets thrown away, she said.

"There's still a very high demand for produce for our partner agencies," she said.

"It's a product we can never have enough of."

Food banks need more produce because they want to respond to issues like childhood obesity, diabetes and other medical concerns by providing healthier choices, she said.

"It's certainly been a focus for food banks across the country — to make sure they are not just getting out pounds of food but food that's nutritious for families," she said.

At the Hoosier Hills Food Bank in Bloomington, Ind., organizers plant their own fresh produce. The agency maintains a half-acre plot on an organic farm; volunteers work with food bank staff member Jessica Williams to plant, weed, water and harvest. Volunteers spent 500 hours toiling in the garden last year, the inaugural year for the project, and grew 5,600 pounds of food for the food bank, Williams said.

College students, businesses and services organizations all organized work days in the garden, she said. Lynn Vince, who volunteered with some co-workers, liked the idea of helping to put healthy food on the food bank shelves.

"Rather than just provide people with canned goods, make fresh produce available to them," said Vince, who spent an April morning pulling weeds. "It's a really good idea to help people add fruits or vegetables in their diet."

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