



Community gardens grow tons of fresh food for the poor in Westchester, Rockland

IN THE GARDEN

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Thanks to dozens of plots in community gardens scattered across the Lower Hudson Valley, patrons of local soup kitchens and food pantries will be enjoying tons of just-picked produce this year. Along with the expected boxes of cereal and jars of peanut butter, they can now look forward to just-

picked collards, tomatoes, hot peppers and eggplants, even homegrown herbs like cilantro and basil.

Through its Plant a Row for the Hungry program, People to People, Rockland's largest food pantry, now collects between 10,000 and 12,000 pounds of produce each year from community groups, home gardeners and local farms.

Big contributors include Cropsey Farm in New City, the Rockland Farm Alliance, the Nyack Garden Club and ambitious home gardeners like Tom Brizzolara, public affairs director of Orange and Rockland Utilities, who regularly drops off several pounds of vegetables from his garden. "We call him the Zucchini King," says Diane Serratore, executive director of People to People in Nanuet, which serves 1,400 families a month.

"We really make an effort to get fresh produce to our families," she says. "There are lots of hungry people out there and if there are new ways to put food on their table we'll do it."

Every spring, summer and fall for the last 14 years, master gardener volunteers from Cornell Cooperative Extension of Westchester have grown about 2,000 pounds of fresh vegetables and berries at the Demonstration Gardens at the Harts Brook Park and Preserve in Hartsdale. Every carrot, raspberry and cherry tomato goes to the pantry and soup kitchen at the women's shelter at Grace Church in White Plains.

"Before the end of the month, we'll start delivering, and the last one is around Thanksgiving with greens, pumpkins, leeks and squash," says garden co-chair Andrea Kish.

They also use the planting beds to teach gardening basics to school and community groups and to test new vegetable varieties from year to year.



In previous years at the Ward Acres Community Garden in New Rochelle, six of the 88 plots had been dedicated to growing vegetables for the HOPE Community Services soup kitchen in downtown New Rochelle. Four nights a week, HOPE serves dinner to about 130 walk-ins, including about 25 children most nights.

"Now we're tithing one-tenth from every gardener," says Joe Rogot, one of three members of the Steering Committee at Ward Acres. Last year, that meant about 500 pounds of fresh lettuce, squash, tomatoes, greens and cucumbers for HOPE in twice-a-week deliveries from June through the first frost.

The gardeners who tend the 66 plots at the Piermont Community Garden are encouraged to donate produce to the food pantry run by St. Ann's Church in Nyack. The fresh food is delivered to the church every Saturday morning. Most years, because of dropouts, three or four plots end up growing food full time for the pantry.

Intergenerate, which runs community gardens in Mount Kisco and Chappaqua, has what it calls Giving Gardens at both sites. In Chappaqua, that means four big plots dedicated to growing food for northern Westchester food pantries, along with 22 beds that local families use for their own dinner tables.

"Everybody kicks in and helps with these Giving Gardens," says Chappaqua co-chair Susan Rubin.

To meet the increasing demand for nutritious fresh food, the Food Bank for Westchester now has its own Food Growing Program at five sites in Westchester that total 3 acres of growing beds and fields. The very successful program is now in its fourth year.

Doug DeCandia, Food Growing Program coordinator for the Food Bank for Westchester, in the garden at the New York School for the Deaf in Greenburgh. This garden, one of five Food Bank growing sites in Westchester, is on about one-third of an acre and will yield about 5,000 pounds of fresh produce annually. by Matthew E. Brown

"Last fiscal year, we grew over 12,000 pounds of organic fresh produce," says Katy Coppinger, director of development for the Food Bank. That translates into 34,000 servings of delicious and highly nutritious greens, tomatoes, beans and squash.

"As the soil gets better, we get more produce," she says. "We're getting bigger and better every year. It's all about the soil."

The gardens are at Leake & Watts' Woodfield Cottage in Valhalla and its main Residential Campus in Yonkers, the New York School for the Deaf in White Plains, the county Department of Correction in Valhalla and Westchester Land Trust's Sugar Hill Farm in Bedford Hills. Muscote Farm in Katonah lets program head Doug DeCandia start his seedlings in its greenhouse.



And new community gardens are sprouting up every spring. This year, seventh-grader Devin Juros -- with an able assist from his parents, David and Margot Juros -- has organized 100 volunteers to help create a new community garden at St. John's Episcopal Church in Pleasantville. They hope to break ground and start planting in the next few weeks, and all of the food from the beds will go to three local food pantries.

HOW TO HELP

The 2014 growing season is just getting under way, but volunteers will certainly be needed in the fields and gardens run by the Food Bank for Westchester this spring and summer.

Contact Nancy Lyons, who coordinates all of the volunteers at the Food Bank for Westchester, at 914-923-1100 or nancy.lyons@foodbankforwestchester.org for more information. Spend a few minutes looking at their website (foodbankforwestchester.org) to see where you might be a good fit.

If you're a farmer or home gardener, the Food Bank is always happy to take your extra fresh produce. Call them at 914-923-1100 for drop-off information.

People to People, at 121 W. Nyack Road in Nanuet, welcomes all donations of fresh homegrown food. They are open from 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. Mondays to Wednesdays, until 7 on Thursdays and 4 p.m. on Fridays, except in July and August when they close at 1 p.m. Information: 845-623-4900, ext. 208, www.peopletopeopleinc.org

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