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A harvest of charity



Submitted photo - Hawking Newcomer makes his way through the community garden grown by the Community Unitarian Universalist Church of Plano. Volunteers and gardeners grow a variety of vegetables for donation to charities as a part of the Community Harvest program.

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The fruits of the labor of love for the community are literally coming in bushels for the Community Unitarian Universalist Church of Plano.

Bushels of squash, cucumbers and other vegetables, to be exact.

The church began its third year of its Community Harvest program as part of a community service project. Each gardener who grows a plot within the community garden not only gets to enjoy fresh garden vegetables, they also donate 10 percent of their crops to a local charity.

Some of the 25 gardeners donate more with even a few donating all that they grow from their 4-by-16 beds, said Deb Bliss, the community garden coordinator for the church. The church was able to donate more than 500 pounds of fresh food to charities last year. They have already been able to donate more than 140 pounds this year alone.

Charities that received fresh donations were God's Food Pantry, Plano Community Charity, Hope's Door, City House and Samaritan Inn.

"I think the first year's harvest was a big moment for me and the church," Bliss said. "We are still getting thank-you letters from the people we donated to."

Bliss said the church started looking into ways they could get members involved in giving back to the community and promote environmental awareness at the same time. So they tested the idea of a community garden by joining in and helping build Plano's own community garden in 2005.

After getting the experience on what works, the church members came back and figured out the logistics to do their own. In 2007 Community Harvest opened up with 11 plots of land and a steep learning curve.

"The experience has been quite the learning experience," said Carrie Dubberley, a master gardener and horticulturalist. "I share a plot with a woman who wanted to get involved but knew nothing about gardening. So we share plots that are next to each other so we both can learn what works and what does not."

After the first year they were able to expand to 19 beds, and last year they were able to add six more, for a total of 25.

"We have a waiting list of gardeners now, to fill in for ones that leave," Bliss said. "We really made an effort to invite the community the first year but now they are coming to us with very little outreach."



Ronnie Baker / staff photo



The annual fee for a plot is \$35, which gives the gardener access to the plot, onsite water and use of community owned tools. Participants must tend to their crops using 100 percent organic assistance; the plot must always be planted or mulched and weeded.

Staying as green and organic is a key component of the garden, said Dawn Graham, a garden owner at Community Harvest.

"Despite the extra effort, the rewards of keeping a garden organic cannot be overstressed," Graham said. "It reduces pollution while producing vegetables and fruits that are superior in both nutrition and taste."

They must also volunteer two hours a month to help maintain the common areas, such as weeding paths, turning compost and tending to the community crops.

Gardeners do not have to be members of the church to join Community Harvest. From people with green thumbs to those who have trouble growing wild grass, all are welcome to join, as they plan how many plots they will have in January. They do not have to be members of the church.

"Just people willing to come take care of their garden regularly," Bliss said. "For those that do have experience in growing vegetables, we will find a mentor."

Visit www.communityuuchurch.org for information on the program.