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Growing charity: Gardeners have options for donating crops



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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As gardeners prepare for the spring growing season, area food pantries look to be the beneficiaries of Plano's green-thumbed residents.

Residents who want to give back to families in need are faced with a multitude of options. Whether with the city or private organizations, masters – and even beginners – of the backyard garden can find ways to donate vegetables.

The Community Unitarian Universalist Church of Plano began its fourth 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 vegetables, they also donate 50 percent of their crops to a local charity.

The group has already assigned all 25 plots for gardeners to grow crops. Each gardener gets a 4-by-16-foot plot of soil to grow what they want, as long as they donate part of their yield. Deb Bliss, the community garden coordinator for the church, said the program members were able to donate more than 500 pounds of fresh food to charities two years ago and 300 pounds last year.

All of the plots of land for cultivation are currently adopted, but Bliss said there is already a waiting list started. Some people from the list have been given plots, as a small amount of turnover occurs during the year.

"Our goal is to continue developing the community and getting together more often," Bliss said.

The group is currently harvesting some of their winter crop and preparing the soil to begin planting after the threat of one final freeze is gone.

Bliss said initially, there were more individual gardeners coming out and learning how to grow more efficiently. Now, entire families – from grandparents to grandchildren – are getting involved.

“Children eat better when they know where their food comes from,” Bliss said. “They learn about patience [and] the ecosystem, and the children pay more attention to the weather.”

The church is not the only group hosting a community garden. The city of Plano has its own community garden for residents who want to get involved.

The Plano Community Garden is a cooperative partnership between the city’s Sustainability and Environmental Services Department, the Junior League of Plano and the Plano Community Gardeners, according to plano.gov. The garden’s 50 raised beds provide more than 1,200 pounds of fresh produce annually to community food pantries and present hands-on educational opportunities for local schools, children’s organizations and organic gardeners.



Ronnie Baker / staff photo



Private gardeners have options for sharing their bumper crops with those in need, whether they choose to do it through the city or community group or go their own way.

A new national program is under way to unite growers and distributors. The AmpleHarvest.org Campaign announced a partnership with the National Council of Churches (NCC) as part of its ongoing effort to help more of America’s food pantries receive locally grown and freshly harvested garden produce for distribution to pantry clients.

Created by Gary Oppenheimer in May 2009, the AmpleHarvest.org Campaign is a nationwide program that enables the 40 million Americans who grow food in home gardens – often more than they can use, preserve or give to friends – to find a neighborhood food pantry eager to receive their excess garden bounty.

Michael Livingston, director of the Poverty Initiative for the NCC, said, “AmpleHarvest.org responds to needs at many levels: the needs of persons struggling to make ends meet to have access to fresh produce for themselves and their families, and the needs of gardeners to respond to God’s call to be faithful and productive neighbors to all members of their community. It’s a fruitful ministry, and it’s a blessing to all who encounter it.”

Organizations can register their pantries to accept donations, and gardeners can find pantries that have registered, at AmpleHarvest.org. Registration, which is free, allows gardeners and pantries to time donations so that produce is ready for use while it’s fresh.