

Garden of Grace in 2012



Sandra Moreno (left) and Master Gardener Debra Jones pick crops and prepare the soil for new plantings.

By Bruce Campbell and Judy Matthew, Master Gardeners

It began modestly in July of 2010 as a project of the Asbury United Methodist Church when Pastor Chuck Johnstone proposed that unused land behind the church campus become a garden to feed the hungry. Two Alameda County Master Gardeners, Bruce Campbell and Mark Brunell, responded to the pastor's call for gardeners. Named "The Garden of Grace," an organic garden built on sustainable agricultural techniques, the first ground was prepared and planting was completed in August and September of 2010. Initially, various crops were tested--based on their yield, nutrition level, ease of growth, and value as ingredients in the local soup kitchen "Open Heart Kitchen" menu.

A little over two years later the summer 2012 harvest figures for the Garden are impressive with a measured total of about 8,000 pounds of

vegetables shared with the Open Heart Kitchen and other area food pantries. This total includes (in rounded numbers): 2,600 pounds of tomatoes, 2,400 pounds of squash, over 1,000 pounds of cucumbers, 700 lbs of peppers and 520 pounds of warm season cabbage, kale and collards; and this was only a fraction of the kohlrabi crops, the balance having been donated to bunnies and harlequin bugs!

Also in the summer of 2012, the Asbury Garden of Grace project became "Fertile GroundWorks", an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. This was an important step as mission objectives and programs are being planned and developed for greater Tri-Valley communities. In addition to expanding harvests for those in need, programs are being developed to engage, educate and empower people and communities to increase their health, well-being, and self-reliance by sustainably growing food for themselves and others. Pilot projects are already under way to help organizations establish and sustainably operate new community gardens. The Asbury community, who provided the bulk of funding for the Garden for the first two years, continues as an important partner in its support of the vision and programs of Fertile GroundWorks. Alameda County Master Gardeners also continue to play an important and expanding role in the education of Garden volunteers and visitors.

As an independent non-profit organization, Fertile GroundWorks can now apply for and receive tax-deductible donations, grants and endowments from the greater community to fund its educational and service programs. One such opportunity is for donors to give through workplace donation programs. The eScrip program and the Lucky Supermarkets S.H.A.R.E.S. (Supporting Humanities, Arts, Recreation, Education & Sports in our Community) program are other ways that donors can help without spending funds of their own.

Another development was the decision to establish a fruit tree orchard with plantings along the front of the garden. Alden Lane donated 21 fruit trees that are being planted following the Dave Wilson Nursery Backyard Orchard Culture concept. The objectives of Backyard Orchard Culture are the prolonged harvest of fruit from a small space. Many fruit varieties may be planted close together with two, three or even four trees planted in one hole. The trees are kept small by summer pruning. Backyard Orchard Culture is high density planting for successive ripening. Small trees yield crops of manageable size and are much easier to spray, thin, prune and harvest than large trees. This approach to a backyard orchard will demonstrate to the local community that gardeners with small yards can still enjoy a variety of fruit trees.

Finally the Garden established itself as an important resource for the community by providing a variety of learning activities in support of the garden's purpose to encourage, empower and teach individuals to grow healthy, nutritious food. The Garden of Grace Learning Series included classes taught by Dr. Mark Brunell, Wente Restaurant Gardener Diane Dovholuk, Bruce Campbell, and new Master Gardener Marion Adams Yoxall.

In addition to these formal presentations, the Garden was the scene of a number of unique learning situations. For example, one Sunday in May fourteen Girl Scouts from Troop 31377 and their parents visited the garden to work on their Plant Badge service project. Other Sundays saw 4th and 5th graders from a local Sunday school class come to the garden to learn about vegetable growing. An ongoing flow of high school students from Livermore and Pleasanton come to the garden to learn about growing vegetables as they help with garden tasks. **Finally, Bruce Campbell**

taught a five-class introductory series on organic gardening at the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. Lectures at the Lab were followed with related, practical work in the Garden.

2012 was another big year for the Garden of Grace. Join us in 2013 to help keep the garden growing. Workdays are Tuesdays and Wednesday from 10 AM to noon, Friday afternoons from 3 to 5 PM and the first, second and third Saturdays from 9 AM to noon. You will find us behind the Asbury UMC at 4743 East Avenue, Livermore. Or visit at <http://www.fertilegroundworks.org>

For more information on the Alameda County Master Gardeners go to acmg.ucdavis.edu/

Photos in this article by Bruce Campbell.



Bruce Campbell displays some of the abundant tomato crop of 2012.