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In Your Neighborhood

SUBURBAN TRENDS

AT THE CENTER OF YOUR COMMUNITY ♦ WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 9, 2009 ♦ SECTION C

Community gardens' cornucopia to be shared with nation's hungry Local effort expands to be part of national effort

BY DAVID M. ZIMMER
Staff Writer

Last October, Gary Oppenheimer noticed that farmers utilizing the West Milford Community Garden were not harvesting all the produce they could.

However, it was not because they were lacking green thumbs, it was simply because the local gardeners were growing more fruits and vegetables in their plots than they could use or give away to friends, Oppenheimer said.

So he set out to change that. Oppenheimer, a West Milford Environmental Commission member, Rutgers-certified environmental steward and master gardener who became the director of the West Milford Community Garden in the fall of 2008, offered plot holders the opportunity to allow him to take their extra produce, so he could give it away to people in need.

The effort was soon named Ample Harvest.

With growing weekly contributions, he soon began an effort to form a dedicated committee to gather and deliver the produce so he could track down other local food pantries to offer them some of his bounty.

However, finding food banks, let alone ones that accepted fresh products to supplement typical non-perishable donations from local residents, churches, regional food banks and government entities, turned out to be more difficult than he could have imagined.

"If I am having this problem, then so are others," Oppenheimer said. "So I thought, there is no reason why people should not be able to find food banks or pantries on the Internet as easily as they can find Italian restaurants."

Internet directory

As a result, Oppenheimer established AmpleHarvest.org this May to allow gardeners with extra produce to easily find local food pantries using a simple

Search: Food pantries

AmpleHarvest.org includes names, addresses, phone numbers, hours of operation and occasional photos of more than 860 pantries across the country. This allows gardeners to easily find local food banks, which, due to limited budgets, can often lack yellow pages listings or Web sites, creator Gary Oppenheimer said. Pantries have even started listing their most needed items on the site, in order to provide gardeners and non-gardeners the opportunity to donate much needed provisions all year long.

nationwide directory. With more than 36 million American's estimated to be food insecure, or suffering from some level of hunger, allowing food, especially fresh, nutrient-rich produce, to rot is illogical, he said.

"My goal in Ample Harvest to diminish hunger in America is working," Oppenheimer said. "But that doesn't mean there is nothing left to do. The more this information is spread, the more we have an opportunity to diminish hunger."

With 860 food pantries now registered on the site, there are approximately 30,000 more to sign up.

Still, in the roughly 15 weeks since the Web site went on-line, the effort has spread quickly. In North Jersey, 20 pantries within 25 miles of West Milford are now registered.

In addition, the locally-grown AmpleHarvest.org project has just as rapidly taken up roots in other densely-populated areas across the country.

Currently, there are 64 food banks and pantries within 25 miles of center-city Dallas, Seattle and Phoenix registered on the site.

"It picked up steam really fast," Oppenheimer said. "But we worked very hard to get this campaign out there."

The effort, coupled with the intrinsic benefits of the campaign, has caused major organizations like the Association of Arizona Food Banks to help manifest Oppenheimer's vision.

"By utilizing AmpleHarvest.org, local gardeners ... can more easily assist their local food pantries and make a difference in their communities," Brian Simpson, director of communication for the Association of Arizona Food Banks, said in a recent press release.

Fresh or not

With the economic downturn, Simpson said that it is all the more important to have fresh fruit and vegetables available to struggling families at local food banks.

However, fresh produce has often been excluded at food pantries, in favor of non-perishable, and generally preserved and less healthy, items. But due to recent increases in the amount of families using food pantries, fresh produce is now accepted at many pantries in order to provide enough food for less fortunate families.

West Milford's Living Word Church Food Pantry started accepting produce for the first

time this summer, after the program brought in locals familiar with the Ample Harvest campaign seeking to unload some extra product.

Helen Sedlack of the Living Word Church's pantry said the extra produce is easily passed on to a list of families who frequent the Hewitt pantry. Recent estimates are that one in every eight families currently uses a food pantry.

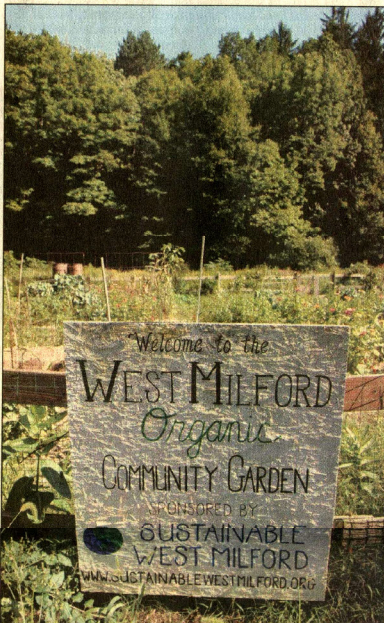
"It's wonderful ... a blessing to us," Sedlack said. "They are doing a great service and we're really grateful for it."

The non-profit Web site operates solely off donations and \$10,000 a month in free advertising from Google. It does not collect any money from either the food pantries or the backyard gardeners seeking a place to put their excess harvest.

To help spread the campaign even faster, AmpleHarvest.org recently unveiled a joint public relations effort with the National Gardening Association to inform millions of backyard gardeners about the Web site by encouraging nursery and garden shop owners to post fliers in their establishments. Already garden shops throughout the region have joined in the effort to promote AmpleHarvest.org.

Fran Earl of Eden Farms, on Union Valley Road in West Milford, said that the effort was something the nursery was compelled to get involved with, as the farm is an active constituent of not only the local gardening community, but the at-large community as well.

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The Ample Harvest campaign, which spawned the on-line directory AmpleHarvest.org, began at the West Milford Community Garden, when Director Gary Oppenheimer offered to take the gardeners' extra produce and deliver it to local food pantries.



STAFF PHOTOS BY PIERFRANCESCO BACCARO

Produce, like this red pepper from the West Milford Community Garden, is finding its way from small backyard plots and community gardens to food pantries across the country, due to the establishment of AmpleHarvest.org. The Web site provides

