

Community gardeners come through for St. Joe's



Jim Collar, Post-Crescent Media

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We're often called upon to make a difference through our wallets.

Leaders at Menasha's St. Joseph Food Program say it can't be understated the big things we can accomplish for the community with our hands. Our gardens have done more than many might think.

"It's been great. We're getting nutrients to the people who need it the most," said Joe Bellmore, operations manager for the more than 30-year-old nonprofit organization.

(Photo: Joshua Bessex/Post-Crescent Media)

As temperatures begin their seasonal downward descent, leaders reflected on another big year for their "Grow a Row for St. Joe's" effort, which asks Fox Valley gardeners to commit portions of their yields to people in need.

Goods came from many backyards. A number of churches contributed. Students at Xavier and Appleton East high schools played big roles.

Even the hometown, professional baseball team pitched in. The Wisconsin Timber Rattlers had a 20-by-30-foot garden beyond left field to benefit the food program.

"This has been everyone," said Karen Ziemke, St. Joe's development director.

Every garden has a story.

Connie Olson of Appleton's Memorial Presbyterian Church said the church's project grew from a mission to extend Christian service in an inclusive way. They chose a garden to which anyone — from young children to the elderly — could lend a hand.

For Mark, Steve and their father, Lawrence "Pete" Petersen, the program provided a unique way to remember a loved one.

The men, who run Petersen Dairy Farm in Grand Chute, opened their garden space to the food program after Rita Petersen, mother and wife, passed away in 2012. She was an avid gardener. They knew they couldn't keep it up. Volunteers were happy to step in.

"It's such a great legacy for my mother," Mark Petersen said.

There were at least seven gardens this season that provided 1,000 pounds or more of produce to the food program. St. Joseph has a large garden of its own. Bellmore figures 200 to 300 home gardeners contributed at some level, but he couldn't say how many for certain. Many don't ask for receipts.

"Some days, I'd get here and there would a dozen bags outside the door," Bellmore said.

Grown donations have made a big impact. Leaders haven't yet compiled their financial savings from the current growing season. Last year, however, the numbers showed about \$10,000 in savings during August and September as a result of Fox Valley gardeners providing produce they'd otherwise have to purchase.

It goes beyond dollars and cents.

It's high-quality food — fresh, local and nutritious.

Those who rely on St. Joe's often receive more fresh foods and get a broader variety. Kohlrabi, zucchini and green peppers were among the season's assortments. The program has done its part by providing recipes for unfamiliar goods, such as late-season squash.

The goal is to provide for 70 percent of clients' nutritional needs.

About 4,800 people in the Fox Valley are touched in some way by St. Joe's each week whether through groceries, meal programs or outreach to other agencies, such as Harbor House and the Emergency Shelter of the Fox Valley.

Many of the group's donors have gained from the act of giving.

Appleton East's garden, in its fourth season, produced more than 3,000 pounds of produce for St. Joe's this year. It's just as much a learning opportunity.

Ryan Marx, an environmental science teacher, said the project in part stemmed from a lack of knowledge among students about how their food came to their plates.

They are learning a skill they'll use for a lifetime, Marx said.

They're also learning an important thing or two that can't be found in textbooks or lectures. It feels good to give back.

"It's just a good thing all around," he said.

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How to help

St. Joseph Program, located at 1465A Opportunity Way, Menasha, accepts both food and monetary donations to meet the nutritional needs of low-income residents of the region.

The program also is supported by volunteer work, including about 300 people who work once a week.

Those who would like to learn more about food needs, make a financial contribution or apply to volunteer can do so at stjoesfoodprogram.org. Food donations are accepted on Monday through Friday from 9:30 to 11:30 a.m. and Monday evenings from 5 to 7:45 p.m.

St. Joseph Food Program can be reached by phone at 920-734-9461.

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