

The Montclarion

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'Every day is enjoyable'



Lester Marks, left, and Carol Byrne work in the Grand Lake Gardens Community Garden, which supplies organic produce for St. Mary's Center.

Seniors produce rich harvest

Oakland retirement home residents grow 600 pounds of organic produce

By J.M. Brown, Correspondent

When the residents of Grand Lake Gardens retirement home sit down for Thanksgiving dinner this week, they can do so with the knowledge that they provided a bountiful harvest for the tables of so many fellow seniors this year.

Since creating an organic community garden in a plot connected to the Santa Clara Avenue retirement home, residents have grown 600 pounds of produce during the past seven months for St. Mary's Center's meals programs for other seniors. The crew planted and harvested spring onions, kale, potatoes, sugar snap peas, squash, green beans, bok choy, spinach, tomatoes, carrots, collard greens, roses and various lettuces in the rectangular garden overlooking Interstate 580 and the Grand Lake Theater.

"We really value fresh produce very highly because we get a lot of other types of donations, sometimes a lot of sweet things," said Sister Marilyn Medau, director of the food program at St. Mary's. "So any type of fresh produce, fruits or vegetables that we are able to provide for seniors is appreciated."

For the urban farmers at Grand Lake Gardens, the community service activity is just pure fun and great exercise.

"Every day is enjoyable," said Carol Byrne, a three-year resident. "Being with our neighbors is great fun." The Piedmont Community Service Crew from the co-ed Piedmont Boy Scouts' Venturing Crew helped the Grand Lake Gardens residents prepare the garden plot over several Saturdays in April. Dozens of teenagers from Piedmont have since worked on the project, which is also affiliated with Rebuilding Together Oakland.

On a recent sunny but brisk morning in the garden, Byrne and a handful of other seniors were busy preparing the planter boxes for new crops. Byrne yanked out a sizable jade bush to be replaced with a row of artichokes she calls "marching soldiers." Lester Marks, who moved into Grand Lake Gardens six months ago, was delighted to join the project because he missed farming the half-acre connected to his former home on 73rd Avenue in Oakland.

"When you see all the flowers and vegetables coming up, it's really nice," he said.

Katie Bonsey, a five-year resident, said the project marked the first time she had ever planted vegetables. She said her husband had always done the planting in the family, while she preferred to harvest.

"It was less work for me," she said with a chuckle. "I'm not sure I enjoy planting, but I like the fact of where (the produce) is going."

To learn more about the Grand Lake Gardens Community Garden, contact organizer Carole Lee at carole-henrylee@juno.com.

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Grand Lake Garden residents, who tend their organic community garden, include, from left, Doris Pummill, Joe Pummill, Lester Marks, Carole Lee, Carol Byrne and Katie Bonsey.

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