

GIVING GARDENS

Food shelves receive fresh produce from local gardens



Diane Dalzell picks peppers that went to the Crosslake Food Shelf or Lakes Area Food Shelf in Pequot Lakes on Sept. 8 at the Ideal Green Market Cooperative.



Photos by Travis Grimler / Echo Journal Kathy Strampe and Bonnie Coffey, with the Ideal Green Market Cooperative Ideal Giving Garden in Ideal Township, harvest beans and other fresh goodies to donate to the Lakes Area Food Shelf in Pequot Lakes or the Crosslake Food Shelf on Sept. 8 at the Ideal Green Market Cooperative.



Travis Grimler / Echo Journal This food from the Ideal Giving Garden behind the Ideal Green Market Coop in Ideal Corners was donated as a part of a program to bring fresh produce to those in need. Pictured with their harvest Sept. 8 are Geoff Davidge, and, from left, Kathy Strampe, Diane Dalzell, George Kohan and Bonnie Coffey.

BY TRAVIS GRIMLER ECHO JOURNAL

Ideal Corners Local growers are joining together to help supplement the offerings at area food shelves.

The Ideal Green Market Cooperative in Ideal Corners dedicated its garden space to adding to the bounty, dubbing it the Ideal Giving Garden.

“Our goal is to provide healthy people, healthy communities and a healthy planet,” said Brittany Goerges, coordinator for the Crow Wing County Master Gardener Volunteer Program.

“The giving garden project was the brainchild of two master gardener volunteers, Dan and Jennifer Lee. It was kind of the result of COVID. We weren’t able to do in-person classes like we generally do, because our goal is education. But with COVID, we kind of pivoted and started using different gardens across the county to grow produce for those in need, especially as we were concerned there would be greater need for food.”

The garden behind the Ideal Green Market Coop became the location of one such garden when volunteers decided not to sell produce from the garden in the cooperative anymore.

“The first year we kind of sold it through the coop,” said Geoff Davidge, intern master gardener and coop volunteer, organizer and member. “We have a farmers market and we decided they didn’t want the competition.

We decided it would be a good idea to just donate to the Crosslake Area Food Shelf and the Lakes Area Food Shelf in Pequot.”

Davidge has been with the cooperative since the start seven years ago and helped establish the garden with lots of volunteer hours and donations approximately three years ago. Donors provided cardboard to kill the grass under the garden, mulch from the Crow Wing County Electrical Cooperative, Garden Circles from Happy Dancing Turtle in Pine River and fence.

The giving garden has provided 170 pounds of produce so far. Davidge said their goal was 500 pounds for the year, but while they didn’t have to contend with extreme drought and heat like the summer of 2021, they still had a late start for gardening that limited some plants.

“We didn’t have much of a spring,” Davidge said. “It was kind of a kaput month for gardening. It finally started warming up the first of June.”

Still, they have managed to pump out healthy produce for the food shelves. The garden has produced herbs, squash, green beans, zucchini, peppers and much more.

“We do dry herbs to give to people,” Davidge said. “Squash are really a big hit and green beans. I think the biggest besides the zucchini are the tomatoes. Everybody likes a good, ripe tomato.”

The garden is also home to companion plants, including hyssop, morning glories, marigolds and many flowers.

In addition to improving production and plant health, Davidge said they wanted the garden to be a peaceful place for a break.

“People can come back here to view the flowers and sit in a chair and just meditate for a while,” Davidge said.

The garden will continue in the summer of 2023, with hopes for a more traditional summer and traditional yields from the garden.

“We did set a goal for 500 pounds of food,” Davidge said. “It’s not a real huge garden or anything like that. I think we’re going to get maybe half that this year. Maybe in a more normal year with an earlier spring we could have done a little better, but our goal is 500 pounds.”

There is a possibility of additions. They would like more Garden Circles, but all expansions would require more work and, by extension, more volunteers.

Master gardeners are also looking to expand this program by involving more gardeners and more gardens.

There is also a giving garden at the Northland Arboretum in Brainerd. The arboretum garden produced over 1,200 pounds of food in the first year.

Master gardeners contribute by growing produce in their own gardens, and there’s another giving garden at Timberwood Church in Nisswa.

The program as a whole among Crow Wing County Master Gardeners has 60 volunteers.

Together in their second year, they produced over 3,200 pounds of food for shelves in Crow Wing County.

Those who wish to get involved may inquire with the Ideal Green Market Cooperative.

“We’re glad we can donate to people who don’t get a chance to grow their own garden, so they can have some fresh produce on their grocery list,” Davidge said.

“We are very excited to get this produce,” said Doris Mezzenga, director of the Crosslake Food Shelf. “The Ideal volunteers pick produce in the morning of our food shelf, twice a month the first and third Friday, and they bring it over fresh. We put it on a table and offer it to our clients.

They absolutely love it. We’re very, very fortunate that they share that produce with us. Our clients really, really appreciate it.”

These giving gardens are just one resource that food shelves throughout the area use to supplement their donations with produce. The Lakes Area Food Shelf, Pine River Area Food Shelf and Pine River- Backus CommUnity Meals program joined a program through Sourcewell in Staples, connecting those nonprofits to area farmers.

The program, called Farmto-Food Shelf, connects these groups to Brakstad Farms of Pequot Lakes to provide nourishing fruits and vegetables to those in need.

This pilot program was funded with a \$50,550 grant.

The University of Minnesota Extension office is accepting applications for the Master Gardener program through Oct. 1. Interested parties may inquire at umn.edu.

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