



FOOD + FAITH Connections



Kara Storey

Parishes Help People Encounter Local Foods

By Kara Storey

When Sue Sack proposed a community garden in 1992 at St. Paul's Parish in Englewood, Ohio, parishioners thought she was crazy and initially offered little to no help.



"The response was very slow," said Sack, director of "God's Garden of Eatin'." "Something along the lines of 'What are you doing? Why?'"

However, Sack pushed forward. She felt called to start the garden after witnessing the low quality of food being offered to people at the Dayton Catholic Social Services food pantry.

"I wanted to offer fresh, local produce to these people, and when I realized that our St. Paul's parish sat on 10 acres of mostly grass, the dots were connected," she said.

Today, the garden is a joint effort of the Northwest Pastoral Region parishes of Precious Blood, St. Paul's and St. Rita's. It existed from 1992 to 2006, and began again in 2008. The organic garden is 8,000 square feet, double the size of the original plot, and Sack expects it to grow again this year.

People in the Pews

More and more parishes are looking for ways for parishioners to encounter local and nutritious foods and

not just buy them, but also become "producers" of the local food system. "God's Garden" is one way of doing that. The surrounding area was at one time very rural and settled by those tied to agriculture.

"We felt it was important both to remind people of these roots, and to encourage them to remember or learn the skills required to produce their own food, as well as to recognize the beauty of the earth and the need for conservation of farmland," Sack said. "Over time the 'local foods' movement has grown up around us and helped us remember again how important it is to use our natural resources well."

The garden produces a variety of produce: tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, greens, lettuce, peppers, beans, melons, potatoes, onions, broccoli, cabbage, herbs and more. Last year 1.5 tons were donated to various local food pantries. The past two years the garden has also offered individual plots to families in exchange for labor in other parts of the garden. The parish region has held two vacation bible schools that focused on the garden and

encouraged families to get involved, as well as provided a platform for talking about environmental justice issues.

Although the garden does provide charity and demonstrate environmental justice, Sack said it's also an active participation in the Catholic belief that when people create beauty, they do so with God, as co-creators.

“Working the earth over a long period of years really increases your faith,” she said. “You begin to realize that even with all of the effort, this really isn't just about you. You push the seed in the ground, but God is the force that encourages that plant to grow and to produce – and if the bean crop fails this year, something else will do very well indeed! Or, you'll have a bumper crop next year. You realize that we really are taken care of on an ongoing, daily basis. The beauty of that statement sometimes takes my breath away.”

For other parishes wanting to start

a garden project, Sack suggests just going for it and starting small. In her experience, local garden stores will donate plants or seeds, she said. The parishes affiliated with “God's Garden” also hold “Donation Sundays” where parishioners can donate seeds.

“It is much easier than you think, and if you put out feelers for those who already garden on a larger scale, you will find those willing to share their knowledge and effort,” she said. “I would also suggest offering specific days for learning gardening skills, [such as] how to plant lettuce, or why to use mulches or interplant.”

Bring it to Prayer

For those parish communities considering a garden, Maggie Castor also recommends bringing it to prayer. That's what she did when she felt inspired to start a garden at St. Eugene Catholic Church in Wendell, N.C., in order to help feed the poor fresh and nutritious food. The church's pastor and parish council loved the idea and so a month later they broke ground in February 2010.

The garden, which is 7,500 square feet and located on church property, grows collards, cauliflower, broccoli, tomatoes, melons, blueberries, sugar snap peas, turnips, carrots, a variety of herbs and much more. The past two years the produce has been donated to the local food bank. However, this year half of the plots are reserved for needy parishioners, in order to provide a “hand up,” said Castor, St. Eugene Catholic Community Garden founder and coordinator.

“Ideally it's so that the people getting the food donations can be empowered to help feed themselves,” she said.

Castor added that the project links the parish to the “eat local” and sustainable gardening movements, which has Catholic roots. She noted that as St. Benedict established his communities, an integral part was the monastic garden.

“He demonstrated that gardens could provide enough food, herbs and medicinal plants to supply the monks, servants and any guests throughout the year,” Castor said.

So far the parish has been very supportive, and support continues to grow, she said. Castor estimates over 100 parishioners have donated time and service, and about another dozen people help out weekly with the gardening during the growing season. The parish also holds garden prayer services to bless their efforts,



Opposite: Since 1994, “God's Garden of Eatin'” in Englewood, Ohio, connects parishioners with local and nutritious food to provide to the local food shelf. Left: In Wendell, N.C., St. Eugene's parish planted their garden in 2010.

Feature Story



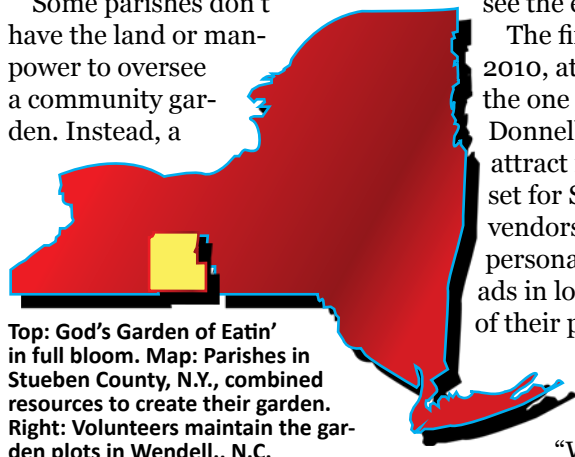
fundraisers and garden potlucks, and still wants to accomplish more. Currently the gardeners and priests are bringing scraps of food for composting, and this summer the rest of the parish community will be encouraged to bring their food scraps as well, she said.

“We are also starting a ‘Table of Plenty’ to encourage parishioners to bring any excess produce from their gardens to a table set up after Mass so that it can be shared with any parishioners that have a need for some extra produce,” Castor said.

Ultimately, Castor said she would like to see all of the churches in Wendell join together to expand the garden ministry in order to feed all of the community’s poor.

Another Approach

Some parishes don’t have the land or manpower to oversee a community garden. Instead, a



Top: God’s Garden of Eat’in’ in full bloom. Map: Parishes in Stueben County, N.Y., combined resources to create their garden. Right: Volunteers maintain the garden plots in Wendell, N.C.

Food Fair and Market, like the one sponsored by the Central Steuben Catholic Parishes (CSCP – St. Stanislaus in Bradford; St. Catherine of Siena in Addison; St. Joseph the Carpenter in Campbell; St.

Mary, Bath; and St. Gabriel, Hammondspport) in the Diocese of Rochester, N.Y., helps promote local and nutritious foods.

The idea for the Food Fair and Market was proposed when the CSCP Implementation Team was brainstorming how to preserve their rural churches as Catholic congregations and as participants in their communities, said Al Donnelly, chairman of the CSCP Farm Fair and Market.

“It was decided that we’d hold an event that would bring residents of our area, or consumers, in direct contact with local food producers by holding a Farm Fair and Market,” he said. “It’s a one-day event open to farm products only – produce, meats and animal products. We do not include crafts, as our initial participants said they did not want to see the event become a flea market.”

The first fair, held in the Fall of 2010, attracted nine vendors, and the one last year had 10 vendors. Donnelly said the group hopes to attract more to the one already set for September 22. Many of the vendors, who were pursued by personal contacts and classified ads in local papers, offered tastes of their produce. Products included vegetables, lamb, honey and alpaca wool yarn and products, and more.

“We also solicited participa-

tion from Cooperative Extension and they provided an exhibit and an agent equipped to explain the differences between ‘organic’ and ‘natural’ food products,” Donnelly said. “The agent also provided literature on proper preservation and storage.”

For parishes wanting to start a similar fair, Deacon Dan Williams, who was part of the implementation team that brainstormed the Farm Fair and Market idea and has attended the event, recommends finding a good administrator “to get things on the rails and the Holy Spirit will take it down the tracks.”

“My advice to other parishes is to have faith that local food producers want you to succeed,” Deacon Williams said. “Talk to them. Honor their feedback. Be patient but try to make incremental progress even if it means occasionally throwing a fit. Have fun and do what you can.”

Those interested in learning more about parish gardens can visit www.catholiccommunitygardens.org.

