

Community Crops, Caring for Neighbors

By Katrina Baxter
Photos by Dan Bravin



A volunteer plows the site of the County C.R.O.P.S community garden.



County C.R.O.P.S volunteers shovel compost in preparation for planting.



County C.R.O.P.S volunteers organized through Hands on Greater Portland.

Carved from a field of overgrown blackberry brambles, a two-acre plot across the street from McMenamain's Edgefield in Troutdale is being prepped for an organic community garden. On this warm day in mid-June, the pungent odor from 35 yards of steaming Metro-donated compost, a combination of food waste and "zoo-doo," hovers in the air. Workers shovel the organic mix into neat rows across the site. Near the road, several people lay the main section of irrigation pipe. Planting begins next week.

Nothing terribly unusual about that. Community gardens are common throughout the region. Except the folks working here aren't renting plots. They're volunteers and, in fact, there are no plots to rent. Every eggplant, squash, onion, carrot and bean produced on the County Community Reaps Our Produce & Shares (C.R.O.P.S.) land goes directly to the Oregon Food Bank (OFB).

County C.R.O.P.S. is the brainchild of Marissa Madrigal, Chief of Staff for Multnomah County Commissioner Jeff Cogen, and a direct response to the crisis that the community is in because of the economy. "[There is a] huge increase in hunger, which is associated with our extremely high unemployment rate," said Cogen.

Oregon's unemployment rate has steadily risen since 2008 to a whopping 12.2% in May, more than double the same time last year. Meanwhile, the OFB's network of regional food banks reports an increase in emergency food box distribution and a decline in donations. The combination has laid bare their shelves.

According to Mike Moran, Food Resource Manager for OFB, the receipt of fresh produce is always a good thing, especially when it's intentionally grown for them and delivered immediately following harvest. Most produce is donated when it's no longer saleable in the marketplace, he explains. "It gets to us late in its life, and we have to move really fast to get it to the people who need it. [Fresh produce has] arguably higher nutritional value, and it's going to have better shelf life for the people who receive it."

But wouldn't the project's \$22,000 budget be better spent buying food that feeds immediately rather than later? No, said Cogen. "The money wouldn't exist otherwise. And we're going to raise the whole thing privately, so at

the end of the day there's not going to be a county general fund contribution." They've already raised \$19,000 in private money, something Cogen said wouldn't have happened if they wanted to buy a truckload of food.

The idea of a community garden donating food to local hunger-relief agencies isn't new. Beaverton's Giving Gardens, which received a one-year reprieve from development, contributes to several charities. So does the Silverton Market Garden and the Salvation Army garden in McMinnville. Multnomah County and the City of Portland joined the produce party this year with small plots at their respective headquarters and the community of St. Helens is trying to put one in the ground. But in each of these cases, the garden either is on privately-owned land or occupies slivers of former lawn.

However, the County C.R.O.P.S. site, thanks to an Interim Agriculture Permit from the City of Troutdale, occupies two acres of surplus metro land. "[This land] isn't going anywhere in the near future, not with the economy the way it is," said Madrigal. It's already been the victim of several failed sales since 2004. And, according to Cogen, it's the only surplus land in the metro area being used in this way.

Although community service crews have performed much of the grunt work, the project has resonated with the community. After seeing a news report, someone volunteered to use his tractor to

mow the access road and till the land. Donated seeds and plant starts continue to pour in. Openings for the first volunteer activity organized through Hands On Greater Portland (HGP) were filled. Ashley, who joked she just needed more exercise, rode her bicycle 15 miles to the site and is shoveling compost alongside Cogen and HGP's Executive Director, Andy Nelson. Jennifer and her husband, recent transplants from Cincinnati, Ohio, chose this project from the many on the HGP site because of its environmental emphasis and its outdoor location.

So what happens when the economy improves and, with it, the salability of the land? It's possible the C.R.O.P.S. farm, with its two-year operational timeframe, will disappear, replaced by businesses suited to the site's current light industrial zoning. But for now, that's not the focus. "We're going to do this for two years and then we'll see what happens," said Cogen. He hopes others with fallow land follow suit. "There is something you can do right now with that land that will make a real difference."

Instead of paving paradise, plant it.

Katrina Baxter is a local freelance writer. Visit her at katrinabaxter.com.



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