

## Community Roots Garden Report

*January - October, 2010*



Community Roots Garden, a ministry of the North Oxnard United Methodist Church, is a 1.5 acre community garden. The mission of Community Roots Garden is largely to increase food security, both by providing the harvest to those in need and by empowering the community to grow their own food. The Garden began in May of 2009 as a response to hunger issues in Ventura County and is now a flourishing community space that includes a fruit orchard, corn patch, tomato field, medicinal herb garden, multi-crop vegetable and perennial area, and eight new 10x20 family plots for indigenous Mexican farm workers to plant and harvest. Aside from these family plots, the garden space is shared by volunteers who come weekly on specified volunteer days to help tend the land, learn about gardening through hands-on experience, and help harvest the fruits of their labors for those in need. Our Saturday and Sunday volunteer “work/play” days also include shared potlucks, which have become loci for the cultivation of community and of deep friendships.

From January through October, 2010, we harvested approximately 4,000 pounds of food. This included green beans, beets, corn, swiss chard, cilantro, green peppers, tomatoes, kale, zucchini, lettuce, cabbage, broccoli, onions, chilacayote (a traditional Mexican winter squash), carrots, and lettuce mix. About 98% of the Garden's harvest is donated to low-income people in the Oxnard community, through Community Action of Ventura County's food distribution system, the Oxnard Rescue Mission, and the Lighthouse Womens' Shelter. The remaining portion is taken home by regular garden volunteers.

In October of 2009, Community Roots Garden was awarded a federal stimulus funds grant through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), which was administered through Community Action of Ventura County. This funding was made available in May of 2010, and Community Roots hired two Garden Masters to coordinate volunteers, increase the land's food production, direct garden purchases, and to facilitate gardening education for low-income Oxnard residents.

The Garden Masters, Katerina Friesen and Eric Humel, developed five distinct educational programs during the 4-month period of their grant funding: (1) Low-Cost Container Gardening workshops, (2) Jardín a la Mesa (Garden to Table) nutrition and gardening education series, (3) Strawberry Patch Preschool education, (4) a workshop, booklet, and documentary film on opportunities in agriculture for youth, and (5) an Urban Agriculture Certificate Training. The following section gives a brief description of each program:

(1) The Container Gardening education program was developed in response to food insecurity and the unavailability of arable land for low-income Oxnard residents. Our Container Gardening program included one initial pilot training program, four off-site workshops in Spanish, one on-site workshop in Spanish, and two workshops in English for Community Roots Garden volunteers. Each workshop participant took home a container planted with a seedling grown at Community Roots Garden. We also produced a 12-page booklet in English and Spanish on the basics of gardening in containers.

(2) Jardín a la Mesa, or Garden to Table, was a 4-week series done in collaboration with Blanca Arias, a Nutrition Educator with Public Health and Nutrition of Ventura County. Together, we developed a 4-

part curriculum in Spanish bringing together gardening and nutrition education. Our objective was to empower low-income Spanish-speakers by teaching a holistic integration of gardening lessons with nutrition lessons and cooking demos. The following basic gardening skills were taught: Container Gardening, Seed Starting, Composting with Worms, and Transplanting. All gardening materials and resources were provided by Community Roots Garden, through ARRA support.

(3) From June through September, Katerina Friesen led weekly interactive garden lessons for the children who attend the Strawberry Patch Preschool, located at the North Oxnard United Methodist Church. Six of these 15 students who attended during summer months received Child Development Resources (CDR) support. The preschoolers planted their own pumpkin patch, and will soon be planting (appropriately) a strawberry patch under the guidance of a new volunteer teacher who is taking over the garden's preschool lessons.

(4) The Garden Masters planned a workshop entitled "Keepin' it Fresh: Job Opportunities for Youth in the Field of Agriculture" for the Cabrillo Economic Development Corporation's (CEDC) annual "805 Youth Exchange." Our workshop track for this youth conference gave examples of opportunities for youth in the area of sustainable agriculture. We created a documentary film in collaboration with Oxnard City Corps to show at this workshop, and also created an educational booklet for the workshop.

(5) Eric Humel, Garden Master, provided 2 hour long workshops once per week for 8 weeks for Oxnard City Corps crew leaders from July through September. These weekly workshops included compost making, grapevine and fruit tree pruning, soil making for seed planting, seed planting, container gardening, sheet mulching, soils and soil development, and irrigation systems.

Thanks to ARRA funding, new and continuing community partnerships, and the effort of old and new volunteers, Community Roots Garden has experienced significant growth during the last ten months. The Garden acquired new materials that will expand and strengthen our efforts, including new tables for starting seeds, a mulcher, a compost-tea brewer, a walk-behind tractor, new picnic tables, an informational kiosk, a water sub-meter that will greatly reduce our water costs and allow for better water conservation, educational materials, and other useful resources.

These materials serve to strengthen our goal of creating a "community of gardens" in Ventura County. Liaison gardeners and organizers from Community Roots Garden have already helped to assist four community gardens in Oxnard, one in Santa Paula, and one that is starting in Fillmore. We hope to provide seedlings, instruction, and other forms of support to these and other community gardens in the area as the movement for food security food justice grows.

There are inevitable challenges that arise when operating a garden with multicultural, inter-generational, and multilingual participants. However, this diversity brings life and energy to Community Roots Garden, and is part of the reason that this ministry of the North Oxnard UMC is so successful. Just yards away from the church sanctuary, the shared garden space offers the richness of community across racial, class, and cultural barriers. In this space of abundance and relationship, all are welcomed, and all are fed regardless of credence or church affiliation. We have discovered that churches are highly amenable, both theologically and practically, as spaces for community gardens. Based on our success, we are currently planning to give presentations at churches throughout the county, encouraging their participation in opening up church land to this form of ministry. It is our hope that a community of gardens will spring up from our local land and labor that is shared in the spirit of generosity, charity and justice.