

Residents Thankful for Community Garden

Written by Alex Garcia

Wednesday, 26 November 2008



PROJECT YOUTH GREEN
YOUTH SPEAK! COLLECTIVE



Juan Lopez cuts anaheim peppers from a vine in his plot at the Paraiso Family Garden.

The first U.S. settlers celebrated Thanksgiving after surviving their first year in the new land and having received the help of native people who introduced them to the foods of the new world.

This Thanksgiving, residents of Pacoima are also thankful for the bounty of produce they've grown in Paraiso Family Garden, a community space tucked away behind the Roger Jessup Park in Pacoima that provides its gardeners with the opportunity to grow fresh vegetables and respite from life's hectic schedule, but also a sense of unity and pride in a community that lacks open space.

Juan Lopez is one of the thankful gardeners. The mechanic used to work the land in his native Jalisco, Mexico, but the home he rents in Pacoima doesn't give him a chance to plant anything.

The garden has given him the chance to get back to his roots as well as world away from life's

hectic schedule and problems.

"For me, it takes away my stress from the current economy," said the mechanic, who has seen his work hours reduced as clients dwindle at the garage where he works. He puts his mind on his plants, which he visits almost every day, sometimes just to "water them."

"Here, you forget your problems for a little a while," said Lopez, who often provides help and advice to other gardeners. "I'm really nosey," he chuckled.



Farmers pose amidst the plots at the Paraiso Family Garden where they plan flower and vegetables.

Lopez often brings his son to help him, has grown pumpkins, onions, tomatoes and sunflowers at the garden and proudly shows off his latest crop- Anaheim peppers that he uses to make hot salsa. And the corn he recently harvested "was so sweet" all you had to was roast them on the fire.

Others, like 65-year-old Linda Murray is thankful for her neighbors, who have taught her how to plant, something she'd never done before.

"People here have shown me how to turn over my dirt, fertilize it, and when the plants grew I got chiles, onions and cabbage," said Murray, a resident of nearby Hansen Hills. "I got to learn how to grow things with the help of my neighbors." The experience, she said, "has been lovely."

Aside from learning to grow vegetables on her own, Murray, who visits the garden at least three times a week, also likes the sense of unity she feels with the other gardeners, many of whom speak mostly Spanish.

"Here is very peaceful and it feels warm and united," she said.

Unity that grows each month when the gardeners gather for a potluck where they taste each other's produce. In summer, they also had campfires where they roasted fresh corn from the garden.

The garden also provides a place for seniors from the nearby CIS Senior Center to spend their days.

"I like the dirt," says 76-yearold Lupe Fuentes with a chuckle when asked what she likes about coming to the garden.

"For me, more than anything it's a distraction and we get to plant whatever plants or seeds we have," she added while watering her plot.

So far, Fuentes has harvested bell peppers, eggplants and tomatoes. The leaves of newly planted lettuce, cauliflower and cabbage are already sprouting in her plot.

The Senior Center has three plots at the garden and a half dozen of its 80 members come each week to take care of the plants. Everything that grows is distributed among all of its members, said Fuentes.

The garden is a project of the non-profit agency Youth Speak Collective. It opened officially in April and since then families have been able to get very good harvests. Twenty families, as well as several members of the CIS Senior Home in Pacoima take care of 60 10x4 ft. plots located next to each other.



Lupe Fuentes waters one of the plots that belong to the CIS Senior Center. She has already grown pumpkins and eggplants and now has planted lettuce and cabbage.

The garden, atop a hill behind Roger Jessup Park along Osborne street, near the Whiteman Airport, is almost hidden from view. The place provides a nice ample space amidst the rows of homes, townhomes and apartments that clutter the area, many of which lack a backyard, much less space for gardeners to indulge their green thumbs. Adriana Gonzalez, project coordinator with Youth Speak Collective, says the garden is precisely for these people. "Each family gets a plot. We like to give it to families who live in apartments or don't have a yard," she said. "We have a lack of green space in Pacoima and we wanted to change that."

People pay \$20 a year to plant in the garden, a fee that covers tools and supplies. They buy their own seeds. Anyone can apply for a plot but they must abide by two requisites: They must give volunteer service two hours a month and must visit the garden at least twice a week. Some families have lost their plots for not abiding to this last requisite.

"Some people's work doesn't allow them to come. It takes a lot of time to garden. People don't realize it. They get excited at first, but then they have problems keeping their hours," said Gonzalez.



Lupe Fuentes works on the lettuce she has recently planted at the Paraiso Family Garden.

Some have stuck with the garden since the beginning, such as Elisa León, another senior gardener. The 72-year-old lives in an apartment nearby and loves the camaraderie she finds at the garden with other people her age and the workout she gets from working with her hands.

"Here you plant whatever you want. You come to work and exercise and we do what we like," she said.

If you would like to apply for a plot at the garden, you can contact Youth Speak Collective at (818) 890-2928 or visit their website, www.youthspeakcollective.org .



PROJECT YOUTH GREEN
YOUTH SPEAK! COLLECTIVE