

Pacoima Residents Enjoy the Fruits of their Labor

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Local Community Gardeners will display their produce at Summer Festival



Sixty families that live in Pacoima or surrounding areas now grow their own food at the Pacoima's community garden.

Ramiro Lopez enjoys putting brown sugar in the boiled squash he grows. His squash also goes into his soup. The tomatoes and chiles are for his salsas. The cucumbers, broccoli and several types of legumes fill his favorite dishes.

"Eating the things you plant...I don't know, they taste different, better," said Lopez earlier this week while watering his plot at a community garden atop a hill behind Roger Jessup Park in Pacoima. Several times a week, Lopez comes to the park to tend to his plants and also to get away from the hustle and bustle of work.

"I have a garden at home, but it's different here," he said. "Here you feel as if you're away from the city. If you stay here, it can get really quiet sometimes."

Once at the garden, you can sometimes forget that you're in the middle of an urban area like the eastern San Fernando Valley where homes, town homes and apartment complex occupy nearly every bit of space. At the garden, the silence is only broken from time to time by the sound of helicopters landing or taking off from the Los Angeles County Search and Rescue headquarters next door.



Ramiro Lopez and his daughter Bianca show off some of the squash they grow at their community garden. Sixty families that live in Pacoima or surrounding areas now grow their own food at the community garden, which has been around since April 2008 and is open all year round. According to the American Community Gardening Association, community gardens encourage self-reliance, produce nutritious food and reduce family food budgets. They also create opportunities for recreation, exercise, therapy and education.

Growers at the community garden can plant whatever they like, except for anything illegal (marijuana) and sugar cane. The roots from sugar cane tend to spread too much and attract plant infections, said Roxana Ramirez of the nonprofit agency Youth Speak Collective, which administers the four-acre garden.

The garden is open to anybody regardless of income, Ramirez said, and has come to represent a major portion of many of the families' diet. Angelica and Julio Penado is one of these families.

Last October they found themselves at MEND(Meeting Each Need with Dignity) to receive services during a difficult time.

Angelica learned about the garden and decided to give it a try.

"I've loved it," she said earlier this week while she watered her plot and her daughters Emilin, 10 and Tania, 5, helped their father pull out weeds.

"We come here every third day," added Angelica. "We've harvested squash, radishes, chiles, tomatoes and we've had so many strawberries."

Besides the produce, Angelica said what she loves most about going to the garden is that it helps her relieve stress.

"Sometimes we say we're just going to water and we end up staying here three or four hours fixing this and that. When you get back home, you're completely relaxed," she said.

An agricultural novice, Angelica said she's learned about plants and planting from other gardeners who readily share their knowledge and experience.



Angelica Penado waters her lot while her daughters Emilin and Tania help pull out weeds.

Gardeners such as David Abundez, who worked the land in his native Michoacan, Mexico, where he also graduated as an agricultural engineer.

"I love working on the land. When I don't have work, I come here and stay all day long," Abundez said.

On weekends, he brings his wife and his seven-year-old son Joel to learn about planting and to enjoy the fresh air produced by the plants, he said.

Along with Jaime Gonzalez, another knowledgeable gardener, Abundez has turned dry, hard earth into bountiful, green plots at the community planting side of the garden, where all gardeners pitch in and reap the rewards. There, you can see purple cabbage, plenty of corn, carrots and onions, as well as artichokes growing beautifully.

"Everything is organic here. We don't use chemicals. It feels good to eat what you plant," Gonzalez said.

Summer Festival Today

Despite the devotion of many gardeners to their plots, other plots sit idle, waiting for people to plant there. That's why today Youth Speak Collective has organized the first Youth Project Green Summer Festival, where they hope to showcase some of the produce harvested at the garden.

"We'll be offering tours of the garden. A lot of people still don't know we're here," Ramirez said.

At the festival, there will also be booths from some 20 different government and community organizations, as well as from sponsors of the garden, including Kaiser Permanente, which will present an \$18,000 check to Youth Speak Collective to help keep the community garden open.

"They're one of our biggest sponsors. They believe in this project," Ramirez said.

People pay \$20 a year to plant in the garden, a fee that covers tools, supplies and all the water you may need, as well as help from the other gardeners.

Anyone can apply for a plot but they must abide by two requisites: They must do volunteer service two hours a month and must visit the garden at least twice a week. They also must not plant anything illegal. Other than that, they're free to try their green thumbs.

Ramirez, of Youth Speak Collective, said eventually they would like to start a farmer's market at the site. But for now "we just want people to know about the garden."

The first ever Youth Project Green Summer Festival takes place today from 5-7 p.m. at the garden, located behind the Roger Jessup Park at 12467 Osborne St. in Pacoima. 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