

VA garden engages and soothes veterans and plant enthusiasts



Written by Carolyn Snyder - Special to the Town Crier

WEDNESDAY, 30 MAY 2012



Photo Photos By Eliza Ridgeway/Town Crier Carlos Limon and veteran Kenneth Smith plant vegetation at the Veterans Affairs hospital in Palo Alto.

A “de-stress” zone has taken root at the Veterans Affairs hospital in Palo Alto.

That’s what Rana Davis of Los Altos calls the organic community garden planted at the hospital’s front entrance on Miranda Avenue.

“Patients stop and look and come in,” she said. “And hospital employees often eat lunch here. It brings joy and a sense of community.”

Veteran John (“Big John”) Mattox, who lives nearby, said he likes to sit in the garden on Sunday afternoons, because “it is so peaceful and quiet.” On Thursdays, you’ll find him there tidying up the planter boxes.

“John is working on beautification,” said Davis, who volunteers with the Veterans Affairs’ MOVE! Weight Management Program, which promotes healthful living through nutrition and exercise.

The Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System Community Garden, an outgrowth of the program, was the brainchild of Camilla Coakley, Palo Alto regional director of the MOVE! program, and Cindie Slightam, research health-science specialist.

They took their cue from the White House vegetable garden started by First Lady Michelle Obama. Their mission: to educate veterans, VA employees and the public on the benefits of eating fresh, homegrown organic produce.

Vietnam veteran Stanley Winch, a retired contractor and MOVE! participant, volunteered to construct raised planter beds and install an automated irrigation system. He and fellow veterans built a picket fence

surrounding the garden.

Mattox and other "Movers" painted the fence and prepared seven beds for planting.

"I know how to use a shovel," he said.

A good thing, because there was a ton of soil to be shoveled and mixed with the donated composted horse manure.

Davis donated the starter plants and seeds, and Slightam arranged for a grant to purchase gardening supplies. The first planting was May of last year.

"We had a successful summer harvest despite the unusually cool weather," Davis said. "And our fall crops provided a steady yield of lettuces, peas, beans and herbs."

Andronico's Market at Rancho Shopping Center donated several bales of hay, used to decorate for the autumn harvest and provide extra seating in the garden. That same hay was used as mulch.

Helping hands

Sharing their expertise are master gardeners Liz Calhoon of Los Altos and Candace Simpson of Palo Alto.

Calhoon, who retired not long ago from the VA after 42 years, became involved purely by accident. She was on her way to visit former co-workers – her arms full of flowers – when she saw the garden and stopped. It was a "task day," and patients and volunteers were gardening. Now she's helping them grow their own flowers as well as fruits and vegetables.

Simpson, a former science teacher, was instrumental in creating a symbiotic environment with flowers that attract beneficial pest-eating insects to avoid pesticides.

Other means of pest control are left to the volunteer gardeners – some of them polytrauma patients – who are assigned tasks such as picking cabbage worms or spraying aphids with water.

Calhoon said she especially misses the polytrauma patient who loved to harvest peas.

"She's been discharged, but it's sad not to see her anymore," she said.

The raised planter boxes are wheelchair accessible and designed so that one can reach at least halfway across.

Seasonal planting

Planting is in full swing. In addition to the vegetables and herbs (all of which are labeled with their nutritional values), boysenberry vines are being trained to grow on the arbor at the entrance to the garden and pots are filled with strawberry plants.

Simpson has helped MOVE! participants plan their own gardens. In fact, Mattox enrolled in her six-week adult education gardening class.

Sharon Moynihan, a healthy living coach for the MOVE! program, has held cooking demonstrations at the garden using freshly harvested ingredients.

"Passersby are invited to take free recipe handouts in the box at the front gate," Davis said. "Everyone is encouraged to lunch in the garden and to pick vegetables or clip fresh herbs to take home."

It is truly a community garden.

The Veterans Affairs Palo Alto Health Care System Community Garden operates with the help of limited VA funding, private donations and a volunteer workforce. To donate funds or help care for the garden, call Rana Davis at 967-3763 or email RanaDavis@aol.com. Mail donations to Davis' attention at 960 Manor Way, Los Altos 94024.

WHAT TO DO IN YOUR GARDEN IN JUNE

Summer will soon be here, and Los Altos resident Liz Calhoon of Master Gardeners has compiled the following tips for gardeners.

- If you haven't already, get those beans, basil, cucumbers, eggplants, squash and tomato plants into the ground.
- Beans grow better if directly seeded. Repeat every two weeks to keep harvesting beans until fall.

- Consult the .pdf of the "Cool and Warm Season Planting Guide" on the Master Gardeners website at www.mastergardeners.org/scc.html for a chart of what to plant when. Click "Garden Help."
- Add 3 inches of compost every time you plant veggies to improve all types of soils.
- Whenever possible, pull weeds before they go to seed to minimize the number of future weeds.
- Plant alyssum near veggie beds to attract beneficial insects such as hover flies and bees to pollinate crops and control insect pests.
- After planting, add 2 to 3 inches of mulch around plants to retain moisture and suppress weeds. Keep it a few inches away from the stems to prevent rot.
- Native plants need some water the first three summers until established.
- Water deeply and less frequently to encourage deep roots, which can better withstand drought. (This does not apply to newly planted seedlings, which may need daily watering in hot weather.)
- Deadhead (remove spent flowers) to encourage continued bloom. Allow some wildflowers to go to seed to attract birds. Collect the seeds to plant in the fall.

Tip: Don't plant a pest

Just because you bought it at a nursery doesn't mean you didn't inadvertently buy an invasive plant species. Educate yourself about California's invasive plants and what a group of dedicated people are doing to help maintain healthy biodiversity by visiting www.plantright.org. The steering committee of the California Horticultural Invasives Prevention partnership designed PlantRight to communicate the need to transition away from invasive plants in the gardening and landscaping trade.

1 Comment

Comment
by **Maura**

1
at Sunday, 03 June 2012 20:29