

ACCESS Food Share Gardens thrive with volunteers

BY KIM BARNES

Growing healthy communities

When I arrived at the ACCESS Food Share Garden in Gold Hill on an August morning, the garden was already abuzz with activity.

Marilee and Ardella were working their way through the 80-foot squash and zucchini rows, carefully checking under the leaves of each plant. They carried five-gallon buckets, which were filling up with pale-green patty-pans, shiny dark green zucchinis, and crookneck yellow squash. Deep in the jungle of tomato vines, I could see Doug and his father, John, reaching for the ripest fruits, a rainbow of red, pink, and orange.

At the wash station, Keiko and Candi were pulling cucumbers out of cold water to dry on draining racks before they sorted, boxed, and weighed them. There was already a collection of buckets on the table beside them, filled to the brim with tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants waiting to be cleaned and boxed. The wash station is where everyone will end up in an hour or so, sitting on buckets under the shade of the madrone trees, wiping and sorting tomatoes, talking and laughing.

As I entered the gate, six-year-old Michael came barreling out from behind a cluster of sunflowers and embraced me at the knee before grabbing my hand and pulling me into the garden to see how the beans we planted last week have begun to germinate. I waved at his mother, Linda, as we passed, laughing at Michael's exuberance. Charlie, the garden manager, was on the other side of the beans, picking cantaloupe. He came to me with a list of questions, observations, and supply needs, but first things first, a hug. And smell the sweetness of this melon! He would cut this one open for everyone to snack on while we worked.

Food Share Gardens volunteers

I have the great privilege of participating in this community as the coordinator of the ACCESS Food Share Gardens, and I am lucky to experience scenes like this, not only here in Gold Hill, but in Medford, Central Point, and Rogue River as well.

Everyone here today volunteers their time. They come to the garden because they love the feeling of community. They come because they enjoy being with the

plants and listening to the birds. They come to learn and share their knowledge about organic gardening.

Garden volunteers have discovered the incomparable joy of preparing and eating food they have grown themselves. And they know how good it feels to be of service. While all garden volunteers will bring home produce for themselves and their families to eat this week, the vast majority of what we pick will go with Sonny, our volunteer driver, to the ACCESS warehouse. From there, it will be distributed through the ACCESS network of 24 emergency food pantries in Jackson County, including one in the Applegate. The fresh organic vegetables we have grown will help provide low-income families and individuals with nutritious food they might otherwise not be able to afford.

Since 2010, Food Share Gardens have produced 400,000 pounds of organic vegetables for the ACCESS network of emergency food pantries. It all began in Gold Hill, where a group of residents started an organic garden to supply their local food pantries. After a successful first season, they brought the model to the ACCESS Nutrition Department. Seeing the value of fresh produce for pantry clients, many of whom suffer from chronic disease, ACCESS developed the model into a countywide program. Community partners generously donate land and water to the project, and each site enjoys the leadership of an experienced local volunteer garden manager.

Volunteers always welcome

New volunteers are always welcome at the Food Share Gardens, whether you have years of gardening experience or none at all. We are in the gardens two to three mornings a week from March until November. We also love to have extra help from community service groups and school groups. Last year, two high school seniors completed their senior projects in the gardens. This year we hope to have more homeschooling families join us.

Food Share Gardens in the Applegate?

ACCESS is committed to supporting the development of new Food Share Gardens in Jackson County, and we would love to see one in the Applegate Valley.



Food Share Gardens volunteers in Rogue River (photo, above) tend to rows of vegetables. Student volunteer Mya Manders from Gold Hill (photo, left) proudly displays the bounty.



Would you like to see a Food Share Garden in your neighborhood? Do you have land to offer or know a few people who might want to help build this kind of community resource? Let us know! You can always start by signing up for Plant-A-Row. ACCESS will supply you with seeds to plant a couple of extra rows in your home garden to donate to ACCESS.

For more information, email freshaccess@accesshelps.org or call 541-779-6691, ext 309.

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Rogue Farm Corps: Passing knowledge to the next generation

BY ASHLEY ROOD

Our working landscapes—our farms, ranches, and forests—distinguish our community and our state. Not only do they keep our farmers' markets and groceries stocked with fresh, healthy, local food, but they stimulate our economy and nurture our ecology by fueling export markets, providing jobs, and harboring wildlife habitat. These lands provided eight billion dollars to Oregon's economy in 2015, and Jackson County's more than 1,700 farms and ranches have an annual market value of over \$64 million.

We are about to see an unprecedented shift in ownership of these working lands. Seventy-two percent of Jackson County farms' owners are over the age of 55. As these farmers retire over the next 20 years, a lot of our farmland will change hands. What will happen with that farmland? How do we continue the Applegate legacy of keeping working lands working? How do we keep our green landscapes from being paved over, from being sliced and diced into smaller plots that are better for homes than food production?

A good place to start is to work with our land stewards: our current and future farmers, ranchers, and foresters. And we need to start with what farmers *think* about but don't talk about enough: financing farmland and succession planning.

On April 23, Rogue Farm Corps is gathering together aspiring and retiring farmers to talk about the nitty-gritty of farmland access and how to pass on the farm to the next generation. It's a continuation of a tradition that started here in the Applegate Valley 15 years ago when Rogue Farm Corps was founded by Applegate farmers interested in passing their knowledge gained through sweat and tears on to the next generation of farmers.

Rogue Farm Corps places interns and apprentices on farms and ranches in four chapters around the state of Oregon, including the Rogue Valley. Host farms like Sun Spirit Farm, located on 30 riverfront acres of certified organic farmland along the Applegate River, give beginning farmers and ranchers hands-on training, while Rogue Farm Corps coordinates classes to teach them the ins and outs of



Rogue Farm Corps interns get hands-on training at Dancing Bear Farms in Williams.

agricultural production. "It's inspiring to see these passionate people learn and thrive on the land," said Megan Fehrman, Rogue Farm Corps education director and farmer at ByGeorge Farm, a dairy in the Applegate Valley. Megan would know—her brothers Johnny and Tyson, who run the dairy, got their start as Rogue Farm Corps interns.

The event on Monday, April 23, is open to the public and designed to help young folks like interns take their next steps, while also helping established farmers learn how to pass on their legacies.

If you are an aspiring farmer, come on out to learn about creative ways to start your farm business with topics on creative leasing, financing options, and agricultural real estate practices. If you are a retiring farmer, come learn from experts about what it takes to pass your farm and your business to the next generation of farmers, ranchers, and foresters. There's also time for us all to gather and connect, building a community to ensure the future of our farms in Applegate Valley.

The event will take place at the Rogue Community College/Southern Oregon University campus, 101 South Bartlett Street, Medford, from 7:30 am - 5 pm. Breakfast and lunch are included. The cost is \$20. Register through ashley@roguevalleyfarmcorps.org.

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