



PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

A MOVEABLE FEAST?

Redevelopment may swallow the Courthouse Garden BY ALEXANDRA NOTMAN

Knee-deep in rows of leafy tomato and potato plants at the Courthouse Garden, Tom Ruck knows that the ground upon which he stands may soon host condominiums. From beneath his cap and bushy white brow, Ruck squints at the midday sun reflecting off the stainless-steel panels of the Wayne L. Morse United States Courthouse. December will mark the three-year anniversary of the garden and the expiration of the University of Oregon's lease on the property. "It's upsetting to think about all the work that has gone into this and just to stop like that ..." he says, scanning the urban bounty. "It was just a hole in the ground. Look at it now; it looks like a little piece of paradise."

Ruck is right. The site is unrecognizable as the mud hole it was three years ago when Judge Ann Aiken spearheaded the collaboration — between the City of Eugene, the UO and the Federal Re-entry program that helps former prisoners transition back into society — that created a community garden. It was designed by Ann Bettman, who supervised the UO's famed urban farm for 30 years.

Today, 7-foot-high artichoke stalks tower above rows of garlic, peppers and beans. Strawberry plants spill onto the sidewalks. The 2-acre site hosts the "Courthouse Garden" course, taught by UO adjunct landscape architecture instructors Lorri Nelson and Robin Selover, as well as re-entry participants like Ruck. The 40-some students learn about everything from ideal composting conditions to regional planting and harvesting to healthy cooking.

The harvest from the Courthouse Garden is also spread

across the community to organizations like the Eugene Mission, HIV Alliance, Relief Nursery and Looking Glass. "The whole goal is to bring these diverse groups of people together," says Nelson. "We are all here to garden and grow food and send it back into the community."

Standing in the rain with a plastic flat of ruby-red strawberries, UO senior Robbie McNulty says the Courthouse Garden changed his life. The end of the term has come and students are scattered around the 8th Avenue and Ferry Street plot, picking bouquets of bachelor buttons, gathering greens, tilling black soil for incoming blue corn and collecting strawberries to bring to the Looking Glass New Roads center. "Science can be detached," says McNulty, who recalls a day when he and Ruck discussed permaculture until it was time to go home. "Working with Tom made me realize how dynamic community is."

By the end of class, 22 pounds each of lettuce greens and strawberries have been collected. Students pack the produce into the bed of a pickup truck, with bunches of parsley and the season's first head of broccoli thrown in for good measure. Selover then zips over to Looking Glass New Roads center, where Chris Mirabel, the center's program manager, is waiting. Mirabel and Selover bring the food to outreach worker August Sabini (see *Happening People*, 6/7) in the kitchen. New Roads serves about 70 meals a day to homeless and at-risk youth between the ages 16-21.

"We wanted to connect homeless youth to the community, and they wanted to connect the garden to the community," Sabini says. "The food they bring to us sticks to their bones. Especially if they can't eat the next day."

In 2011, the youth used strawberries donated from the garden to prepare strawberry shortcake to share with elderly residents at the Avamere Rehabilitation Center.

The garden's keepers realize their piece of paradise may soon be lost, at least at its current location. Nelson recently met with Assistant City Manager Sarah Medary and Community Development Division Manager Mike Sullivan to discuss the site's future. "They love what we're doing," Nelson says. "It's a great mission, but they're reluctant," she says. "We can move, but we all know that's not an easy thing to do. It took a lot of effort to build this garden."

Sullivan points out that the plan was always for the garden to be temporary, since the site would eventually be commercially or residentially developed. "We expect to discuss future redevelopment options for the site with the City Council sometime in the next few months," says Sullivan. "While it is not likely we will extend the lease for a significant period of time, this has been a great partnership and we'd be happy to help them find a new location."

Ruck splits open a plump fava pod — the beans are ready to eat. He speaks excitedly about the day's harvest. "The salad greens are just fantastic. I picked a bunch of snow peas and peas in the pod that are going to be fresh in the salad." He points to garden beds he helped build and the relationships that have grown; Ruck and McNulty are going fishing next week.

Ruck says he will volunteer in the garden as long as it's there, which he doesn't expect to be long unless a "big-hearted donor" comes along. "It would be a shame, but you can't stop progress," Ruck adds. ■

