



PHOTO COURTESY OF HUERTO DE LA FAMILIA

A GROWING COMMUNITY

Huerto de la Familia puts fresh meals in people's hands

On a typically gray late-summer day in Eugene, Marissa Zarate, executive director of Huerto de la Familia (“The Family Garden”), took *Eugene Weekly* on a tour of the organization’s garden wedged between Churchill High School and Kennedy Middle School.

The garden, which provides plots and materials free of charge for 40 families, is bursting with tomatillos, chiles and corn, all ready for harvest.

Huerto, which has been active in the Latino community since 1999, has been growing rapidly in recent years and is planning to provide gardening plots for as many as 110 families next year. The organization was founded to improve access to fresh food and has expanded to provide small-business and farming classes targeted at low-income immigrant families.

Who is your target community, and how do you get a plot?

Marissa Zarate: Our services are geared toward Latino families; all of our staff are bilingual and bicultural, but we’re open to everybody. Not all of the families here are Latino; we serve low-income families. Our goal is to help people who don’t have enough money to afford these products, so instead they can grow them themselves. The other requirements are that you show up, you tend to your plot and take care of it the way you’re supposed to.

We don’t ask to see income verification. We don’t want to put people through those hoops. We see that families are deciding on their own whether they qualify. We see that some of our families, when they try to use other services, get turned away or feel uncomfortable, and we’ve had families that go to food banks and get turned away because they don’t look like they need it. Some of our families will dress up as best as they can because they are nervous to use the service, and they’re turned away for that. They also feel really intimidated by the language barrier.

All of the other programs, of course, are working to make their services more accessible and we work with FOOD for Lane County a lot, and I know they have a lot of different ways they are trying to do that. They have some bilingual staff and one food bank that’s run entirely by Spanish-speaking staff.

Some of your students have brought what they learned in the class into the field. Can you talk about that?

One of our former students, Ma, wanted to build a kind of nonprofit with her garden. Her goal was to start a garden plot so she could donate food to people who couldn’t garden. Her thoughts were helping people with disabilities, veterans, single moms who couldn’t be in the garden every day and people who just couldn’t get a space. She’s been growing food and taking it to places that serve families and leaving it there to take for free.

It’s taken a lot of volunteer power ... she’s gotten a lot of help to do it. She had a vision, and she went through a lot of work. She took a 20-week business class, and we worked with [Oregon State University] last year and they created a 10-week farm-business curriculum for farmers we work with.

What are some of the challenges families in your business programs face?

It’s such a challenging program because our families start at such a disadvantage. That does not mean they feel crippled by that disadvantage; they’re so entrepreneurial and ready to go, but some of them didn’t go past fifth grade and we’re trying to teach them accounting math. It’s really challenging, but it makes it more important. When something’s hard, that means it’s even more important for us to be there to serve these families and help them succeed or give them the best chance at success.

Most of what we do we’re kind of figuring out as we go, which means reevaluating what we’re doing, then deciding how we’re going to tweak it for the next year. Things are always changing. The farm program curriculum last year was new. Last year was the first year it was taught by [OSU]; they were coming down to teach it every week. They donated half of the classes and we paid for the other half.

[OSU has] a small farms program and they are trying to build a lot of community within Latino farmers. They’re having an event this month for Latino farmers to get together and meet and talk about some of the challenges they are facing.

Unlike the other areas of the city, west Eugene doesn’t have any city sponsored gardens. How are you addressing this issue?

We partner a lot with Beyond Toxics here in Eugene, and they did some research that shows the lack of green space in general in west Eugene. They partnered together with us to see if we could get some garden plots out there in west Eugene. They don’t do gardening, but they feel really passionately about improving green space and food access.

Calapooia High School built a beautiful state of the art farm, and the students are growing food to go into meals for the school district. Next to the farm there is space to garden and they asked us to manage it, so that’s going to be our next expansion into west Eugene.

That garden is going to have space for 25 families. It’s really exciting because we have the need there and because we can do outreach and look for people instead of having them on a waitlist.

Our goal is to get people for that garden through our six-week gardening class this winter. Our goal is to have everyone take the class so they can all start with a baseline of knowledge and then go from there. It’s also going to create some community among the people who are going to be gardening there so they have time to form some relationships.

It’s always a special experience where you can start a new garden together to have the people figure it out together and get to know each other. It creates that really cohesive cohort feeling. That worked really well at our Springfield garden at Willamalane.

What are some of the biggest challenges Huerto faces?

Right now we’re running six spaces with half the staffing we should have, and we’re about to add more [staff]. Once we add those Bethel families, we’ll have doubled in size in two years. So we need double the funding and double the staffing. We’re doing a fundraising blitz throughout the month of October, trying to get money in the door. We’re doubling in size and we have to start getting more community support to keep doing the work we’re doing.

The community is really passionate about showing immigrant families that they’re welcome and safe in Lane County. My goal is to let people know there are places that they’re safe and about the things we’ve been doing to create a welcoming community for Latino families. We can’t always just be defending ourselves, we have to promote the things that create positive interactions and create a positive and caring community. I hope people will see the value of what we’re doing. ■