

TY NEWS

Greeley Forest Garden explores mission of food justice

Barbara Quinn

You may have noticed when traveling on N. Greeley Ave. near its intersection with N. Interstate, a garden with plants nearby. The .6-acre garden site was donated by Multnomah County to Oregon Sustainable Agriculture Land Trust (OSALT) in 2005 with the goal of establishing a forest garden. The site had once been a battery factory but DEQ soil testing showed it to be safe for gardening. The vision for the forest garden is a canopy of fruit and nut trees over an edible shrub layer that, at maturity, would not require additional watering during the summer months (osalt.org). An important feature since water is not available at the site.

The Urban Farm Collective has been working for several years to clear weeds from the garden, mostly blackberry. Currently, the flat area is cleared and planted and the hillside is partially cleared. Much of the food grown at the garden will be harvested and distributed within the community including a farmer's market at Sisters of the Road Cafe serving the houseless community.

Kelcy Heerspink and Marty Lamers of the Urban Farm Collective explained that a partnership with Sisters of the Road Cafe was formed a year ago when Kelcy volunteered at the cafe and became impressed by its philosophy of gentle personalism based on the writings of Peter Maurin from the Catholic Worker movement. Maurin believed in a return to the land and farming with one's own hands as a way of healing and gaining a balanced perspective. At the same time Sisters was conducting food forums and exploring ways the houseless could access good, healthy food. Travis Smith of Sisters said people experiencing homelessness didn't want a handout, but wanted to be part of the conversation. Sisters and the Urban Farm Collective thought there might be good partnership opportunities if they worked together. Sisters of the Road's mission is to build authentic relationships and alleviate the anger of isolation in an atmosphere of nonviolence and gentle personalism that nurtures the whole individual (sisteroftheroad.org).

On a recent visit to the Greeley garden during a work party, volunteers from the

Collective and Sisters clipped back encroaching weeds while making room for a grape vine full of ripe grapes that had miraculously survived in the midst them. Organizers say the garden produced around 700 lbs. of food this year.

One Sisters patron said he feels safe and has a chance to de-stress at the garden. It gives houseless people a moment to rest in a world where they generally don't feel welcome or safe and have to keep walking for hours on end to avoid conflicts.

A line of tents south of the garden is on separate ODOT property, and not actually related to the project. It has been recently served with an eviction notice (North Portland Homeless Camp Faces Eviction, Hopes to Emulate Right 2 Dream Too, by Andrew Theen, Oregonian, Sept. 22, 2015). The campsite is seen by garden organizers as an opportunity to engage more of the marginalized in the project. Raven Justice, a houseless volunteer who has been with Sisters for a year, said he would like to see a sustainable model for a place where people could stay. He said, "When you give back to the community you're really doing something for yourself. You're building self-esteem." He has created a sacred garden at the site, clearing out a circular area in the midst of cottonwood trees where he hopes to plant a sacred herb garden. Justice also believes in personal accountability. "We try to tell people to respect the area."

Forest Garden volunteers meet at Sisters of the Road Cafe at 133 NW Sixth Avenue every Sunday morning at 9am for breakfast and a chat about what needs to be done at the site. The group of volunteers leaves by carpool or bus at 10am and work as long as they want, usually until 2 or 3pm. A chalkboard onsite lists tasks that need to be done: including gardening, weeding, trash pick up, and moving wood chips. All are welcome and encouraged to join in. Contact greeley_forest_garden@osalt.org to learn more about volunteer opportunities.



Top: View of the Greeley Forest Garden

Left: Kelcy Heerspink, volunteer and Urban Farm Collective member

Right: Greeley Forest Garden sign



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