

Planting deep grows community garden



Q&A

with
Mary Blake

Q: What is the significance of the Sunny Pool Garden in Seaside?

A: As the Aquatic Director for the city of Portland from 1974 to 1984, many of the parks with pools had community gardens. I knew from experience how important they were for each neighborhood. So, as general manager for the Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District, when Sunny Hunt, our remarkable teacher from the OSU Extension Service came to me and asked if we had any land so the Kids Nutrition program could grow their own pizza, I knew that it would be a good thing. That was in 2005.

By 2006, we had 19 plots, behind Sunset Pool — two of them dedicated to the Kids Nutrition Program — the rest were for individuals or organizations. At the beginning, there was a strong interest of growing fresh produce for our food pantry as well for individual consumption. Together with Astoria's Hope Garden, we formed the Friends of Clatsop Community Gardens and have grown to include two community gardens in Seaside, two in Astoria and one in Hammond.

I was one of the first gardeners and board member on that nonprofit, and now serve as a board member on our local food pantry and the North Coast Food Web.

I believe our community gardens are an important part of the growing local food system that is making a difference on our community's quality of life in many powerful ways.

Q: What do you do with extra produce?

A: We try to have no waste in our garden. With the kids' plots, as they harvest, they wash it and eat it right in the garden. They take great ownership when they know they grew it and they love the fresh taste. They share their produce with other kids who may not have been in the garden program and then they set it out for the families of the kids in the program. Almost all of our gardeners share with friends as well as allow us to harvest their gardens if there is extra and take it to the food pantry. As the gardens go through their cycles we compost the material to create new healthy soils to use in our beds.

Q: As a new Master Gardener, what did the program teach you?

A: When I retired in 2012, one of the first things I wanted to do was take the "Sustainable Gardening" class the Master Gardeners teach through the Oregon State University Extension Service. I had been so impressed over the years with their program and their volunteer outreach programs that I was eager to go back to school and become a student.

The program is amazing and the presenters the best in their fields. What I learned is the more I know, the more I realize I don't know, which is the invitation of becoming a lifelong learner. I have become very intimate with my gardens through observation.

The class has given me a science-based approach to my constant dreaming. The written material is a great reference, but it's the support of the teachers, students and of course the best teacher, Mother Na-



JOSHUA BESSEX — The Daily Astorian

Mary Blake stands in the Sunny Pool Garden in Seaside Monday.

'I believe my soil is the soul of my garden.'

ture, that helps me grow and understand my place in the scheme of things.

After observation, it's all about your soil. I believe my soil is the soul of my garden. The healthier your soil, the healthier your garden.

Is the garden Organic? Why?

A: Yes, my garden is organic. I choose to go organic for the health of my garden and thus for my health. When chemicals are used on the soil it poisons the life in the soil. When genetically modified seeds are plant-

ed to resist drought or produce more, they poison the plant. When chemicals are used on the plants during their growing life cycle they poison other living creatures. When plants are consumed they carry poison into our bodies. When we include the total cost of using chemicals in our food, the cost of health care and the cost to our environment, we will find that going organic is the best way to grow our food.

Mary Blake is the retired general manager of the Seaside's Sunset Empire Park and Recreation District, a Master Gardener and community volunteer.



KATHERINE LACAZE — EO Media Group

Mary Blake, right, chops fresh zucchini for campers Lily Bessinger, 6, from left, Riley Burd, 9, and Brody Brenden, 7, to put on their garden salad wraps last summer. The produce earlier was picked by the campers from designated plots at the Sunny Pool Community Garden.



KATHERINE LACAZE — EO Media Group

Master Gardener Mary Blake, from left, lets summer campers Caleigh Peterson, Hannah Fagan, Chloe Brenden, Brody Brenden and Lily Bessinger sample some fresh broccoli. The participants of Seaside Youth Center's Summer Camp programs worked with the Master Gardeners once a week in the Sunny Pool Community Garden in Seaside.

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