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PHOTO BY DANNY PETERSON/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

Charles Robertson (left) and Kris Soebroto help run Village Gardens, a non-profit community garden and grocery store in north Portland aimed at connecting low income and diverse communities to fresh, healthy food.

Village Gardens a new resource for fresh and healthy

BY DANNY PETERSON  
THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

A local non-profit is taking a unique approach to connecting low income communities to fresh, healthy food by facilitating both a community garden and a grocery store that sells its produce, providing access for community members to grow their own food and discounts in a retail setting for its low income customers.

Village Gardens was established in 2001 by community leaders in the St. Johns Woods apartments (now called Cathedral Gardens Apartments) and organized with Janus Youth Programs' support. In addition to the community garden, which serves about 80 gardener families, an orchard of

# Changing Eating Habits

about 50 fruit trees is co-located at the site, and the harvests from the garden and orchard serve about 400 people per day in the grocery store.

"We share food, cook food, grow food, and sell food, as a way to build community and build economic resilience in the neighborhood," Village Gardens Program Director Kris Soebroto told the Portland Observer.

"For the most part, it doesn't get any more local than a block and a half away,"

added Charles Robertson, Village Gardens' prepared foods manager, referencing the close proximity the grocery store, located near the corner of North Trenton Street and Newman Avenue, is to the garden, just a short walk to the east.

The outreach comes as low income communities experience a worsening access to healthy foods, particularly in the last half century, a trend that's occurred locally and across the nation, Robertson said. Research also suggests racial and ethnic disparities

prevail when it comes to the availability of fresh food grocery stores serving lower income neighborhoods.

"That's making these communities the hub of diabetes and unhealthy eating habits," he said.

Robertson has been involved with Village Gardens since 2008, about the time the grocery store component of the organization was being established, and was integral to getting that program off the ground through grant writing and organizing. That occurred in response to the closure of a for-profit grocery store in the neighborhood, leaving low income residents few healthy options for food.

The operators of the former store also had a mission of servicing low income customers and had about a third of the store's sales come from the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP)

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