

Community garden keeps kids busy



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By RUSS OLIVO

WOONSOCKET — They're still lining up volunteers and donations of fertilizers, tools and seedlings. And with a little luck, a yearlong effort to launch a community garden will all come together this weekend at an abandoned ballfield off Clinton Street.

A joint venture of Family Resources and the Rhode Island Food Bank, the project is largely aimed at providing free, fresh produce to the economically strapped. If all goes according to plan, it will also provide temporary jobs for the kids in Family Resources' YouthWorks411 program — the kids who helped dream up the idea for a community garden in the first place. But Gretta Jacobs, a youth coordinator with the program, says the community garden strives to be more than a source of food and jobs. Organizers hope that by bringing together people from different walks of life, it will strengthen community morale and lift the city's collective spirit.

"I hope it's the best thing Woonsocket ever did to bring the community together," says Jacobs. "People want to have common interests and get to know their neighbors, and this is going to be like the kitchen table, a place where people can just come together to do that."

As another staffer at Family Resources put it, "It's a garden of hope."

Community gardens have been a staple of the social landscape in the United States in tough times since the Potato Gardens of the 1890s. In World War I they were called Liberty Gardens and during the Depression they came to be known as Relief Gardens. Perhaps the current generation of post World War II baby boomers will remember them best as Victory Gardens. Today, tough economic times are just one part of the social equation that's fueling a bumper crop of community gardens. The nation is in the midst of a Green Revolution, in which the recession has joined forces with heightened concerns about the environmental and nutritional consequences of the food choices we make.

It's a perfect storm of cultural forces that has seen a surge of interest in community gardening, according to the American Community Gardening Association, which estimates there are more than 5,000 of them in the nation, many in inner city areas. Civic hosts claim a bounty of dividends from the communal effort of coaxing fresh fruits and vegetables from the earth, even lower crime rates.

Many community gardens rely on the goodwill of volunteers who provide labor and materials, and so far Woonsocket's has been a textbook example, says Jo C. Goode, also a coordinator with YouthWorks411. When George Brainerd, executive director of the YMCA, heard that Family Resources was exploring the idea of a community garden, he generously offered the use of a long-neglected parcel of land behind the Verizon building. Sandwiched between a grassy embankment of the Blackstone River and the Verizon parking lot, the land is owned by the YMCA and once served as a little league field.

Lowe's Home Improvement chipped in with lumber to build raised beds and Wal-Mart is donating seedlings. The city of Woonsocket has agreed to dispatch its infamous "water buffalo" truck to irrigate the garden. And Wright's Dairy Farm in North Smithfield is giving badly needed manure to boost the plant-growing potency of the soil.

That's only a partial list of donors, says Goode, but there is still a need for more volunteer labor, materials and tools to make sure the effort hits the ground running. The gardening kicks off in earnest on Saturday at 10 a.m. - a good time to show up. The rain date is Sunday, same time. Many have jumped at the chance to

help, but Goode says, "We're starting out with no money and we have a very long needs list."

THE GARDENING project, dubbed GrowUp (Gardening Resources of Woonsocket Utilizing People), will work like this: The garden will be divided into two sections, a common area and another containing raised beds. Anyone who wants to participate in GrowUp, regardless of economic need, may cultivate one of the raised beds for their own use, provided they volunteer some cultivating time in the common area, where produce is destined for the poor.

Under an agreement with the Rhode Island Food Bank, says Goode, the produce from the common garden will be funneled directly to nine food pantries in the Woonsocket area that are part of the statewide organization's distribution network.

Michael Cerio, spokesman for the food bank, says that produce is sorely needed. As the recession has deepened, more and more people are turning to the agency's food pantries for their nutritional needs. "Our food pantries are being overwhelmed with requests for assistance and we're doing everything we can to keep up with the demand," says Cerio. In the last seven months, said Cerio, the Woonsocket network of food bank distribution sites assisted an average of 2,792 families per month with food supplies. The food bank distributed a combined 196,000 pounds of food to those outlets during that period, and the demand appears to be still climbing.

Amanda Madera, 17, a member of YouthWorks411, says she is glad for the chance to help by working in the garden. But she looks at the garden not just as an opportunity to address the problems of poverty and hunger, but as a "safe" place to be with good friends and avoid the problems of the street. "Hunger, that's a really horrible thing," she says. "But this about more than just giving people food. For me it's like keeping a promise, which is something that's very important to me. It's like a promise that I'm helping people and in return I'm going to do better myself."

Madera was among 10 founding members of YouthWorks411 who began laying the groundwork for GrowUp with a survey to gauge the level of interest and willingness to participate in a community gardening project. Among other things, the survey found that 67 percent of the people questioned were "very concerned" about the rising price of grocery store foods and an even greater number thought a community garden would benefit the city "a lot."

While volunteer labor will be an important component of GrowUp no matter what, Goode says there is also hope that YouthWorks411 will receive an economic stimulus grant from the state Department of Labor and Training that will create 15 temporary jobs for youth to work in the community garden. The plan is to pair them up with adult mentors with gardening experience to expose them to careers in agricultural and horticultural fields.

Self-described "garden Nazi" Mark Foley, a home gardener with 25 years of experience with raised beds, is the youth services manger for the project and will serve as the sort of resident green thumb for the project. No question, says Foley, GrowUp will get a harvest by the end of this growing season. But since this is the inaugural season for the garden, Foley says it's hard to predict what the plot's yield will be or how many families it will feed. GrowUp will simply follow the food bank's advice: stick with the basics -tomatoes, cukes, winter squash – work hard and hope for the best.

Before settling on the old ballfield – and onetime mill site – as a prospective garden plot, the first thing he did was to have the soil tested to see whether it was polluted with industrial compounds that would have prevented GrowUp from using the site.

"It's definitely clean enough – there's no heavy metals," says Foley. "But it's also low in nutrients. The soil has to be amended with nitrogen and potassium."