

Nature Center Program gives big to Food Bank

By Cliff Bellamy : The Herald-Sun

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DURHAM -- On a recent hot day -- the kind that makes well-tended vegetable gardens thrive -- Christine Hughes, an instructor in the Goodwill Community Foundation's Nature Center Program, showed Sarah Spruill how to use a pair of snips to harvest an eggplant while leaving the green plant intact.

"There you go," Hughes tells Spruill as she brings a shiny, purple eggplant out of a raised bed. "Check it out. Check out that eggplant."

Spruill, along with Pauline Reynolds, who also attends classes and programs at Goodwill Industries, also harvested cucumbers, flowers, corn and other vegetables from the Goodwill Community Foundation Nature Center off of Chin Page Road.

That eggplant and other vegetables will take their place alongside about 1,236 pounds of fresh produce that the farm has donated so far this year to the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina. Last year, the program sent 2,000 pounds of produce to the Food Bank, said Becky Lytle, spokesperson for Goodwill Industries of Eastern North Carolina. With the addition of 35 new raised beds this year, the Nature Center Program has a good chance of doubling that donation this year, she said.

Each week, the program sends anywhere from 100 to 200 pounds of fresh produce to the Food Bank, depending on what is in season, Lytle said. "Our goal is to be able to produce as much food as we can for the Food Bank," she said.

The Food Bank has branches in Durham, Greenville, Wilmington and the Sandhills. In 2008-09, some 7.3 million pounds of fresh produce was donated, including vegetables from large farms, said Peter Sloane, the Food Bank's regional operations manager. The Food Bank has developed a good system to get the produce moved quickly to partner agencies that use the food, he said. "When they drop it off, it's a highly coveted item, and it'll get into our refrigerator in an hour or less," he said.

"The nutrition value of fresh grown and fresh picked [produce] is very much needed," Sloane said.

Reynolds and Spruill are among 33 participants in the program. Two groups come to the farm two days a week for about five hours each. They help with planting, growing, nurturing and harvesting. Goodwill also has a separate class for senior citizens, who also help in the garden.

The program started about five years ago. Lytle said Spruill began the program as a teen-ager, "then it evolved into a program for adults with disabilities," she added.

With a 4,500-square-foot greenhouse, the program can donate to the Food Bank year-round, Lytle said. Outdoor beds also are planted with winter squash during the cooler months. On this day, some new eggplants were beginning to flower in the greenhouse. The greenhouse also had a healthy crop of tomatoes and various kinds of peppers.

Fresh, pungent purple basil plants lined the outside of the greenhouse. The outdoor beds this day also had healthy stands of sage, chive, lavender and lemon balm -- which participants also harvest, bag and send to the Food Bank, Lytle said. The outdoor beds also have ripening stands of tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, corn, eggplants and blueberries.

The blueberries are a fairly recent addition. "We planted blueberry bushes a few years ago, and this is the first year they have been prolific," Lytle said. On several trips, the blueberry harvest accounted for 20 to 30 pounds of produce this summer.

A memorial garden, which has flowers and shrubs, also sits next to the produce garden. Students in the Nature Center program also get experience maintaining the memorial garden. (Later in the summer, they also will have a tomato sandwich party in the memorial garden.)

The Nature Center serves adults with disabilities. In addition to planting and harvesting, participants also learn about conservation. Crops are rotated yearly, and the garden has a compost pile. Twelve cisterns collect rainwater for the greenhouse and memorial gardens.

Each participant in the program has a bucket for harvesting. They wear gloves while harvesting to prevent bacteria being passed to the produce, and all produce is cleaned well before shipping, Lytle said. Students also help box the vegetables. All produce in the greenhouse is organic, and produce outside the greenhouse area does not use harmful pesticides.

Reynolds said she likes planting flowers, tomatoes and corn. She keeps a flower bed at the group home where she lives.

Sloane praised Goodwill's program for teaching people how to grow their own food, and for "allowing people to have an outlet for giving."

"It gives them an opportunity to have something to do, and be out in the gardens and the sunshine," Lytle said. Participants also "know their work is benefiting other people."

"They really love the fact that they are giving to the community," Hughes said.



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