

Generosity thwarts veggie thieves

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— SALEM — Local gardeners have delighted in cultivating their plots at the new Community Gardens at Palmer Cove, but the succulent tomatoes, eggplants and peppers are apparently too tempting for some.

Gardeners are trying to stave off a rash of vegetable thefts, including a few people who have brazenly plucked veggies in broad daylight and ignored gardeners who confront them.

Luckily, the youth group from Grace Episcopal Church on Essex Street is volunteering at the garden this summer, so the teens are now building a community plot outside the garden gates from which anyone can pick vegetables.

“That’s why we’re doing the plot, so people can take from it and won’t be taking other people’s vegetables,” said Elianna Ovalles, 14, who helped carry and transplant vegetables into the new plot on a recent morning.

Lisa Spence, co-president of Salem Community Gardens, said vegetable poaching is a common problem at community gardens, but she believes the Salem incidents may be partially due to misunderstanding, because the garden donates vegetables to St. Joseph’s Food Pantry every Monday.

“I think if anyone came and asked a gardener, they would be happy to share,” Spence said. “But it’s the taking that’s the problem. Some people work very hard on their gardens, and it can be discouraging.”

Salem Community Gardens opened its first garden last summer at Mack Park and a second one this year at Palmer Cove, both on city land. Both gardens were instantly popular, and plots filled quickly, creating a waiting list.

The thefts are also an issue at Mack Park, but less so, Spence said.

In response to the thefts, the garden group held a meeting and decided to lock the garden until the gates are constructed and fully in place.

“We’re still optimistic we can work this out,” Spence said. “We want this to be a very inviting space, not a locked fortress. We’re hoping reasoning will work, and explaining to people.”

Helping hands

In response to the thefts, former City Councilor Lucy Corchado created a sign for the garden, in Spanish and English, to explain how the garden operates and direct people to St. Joseph’s if they need vegetables. Additionally, the teenagers are sowing the communal plot.

“We’re so appreciative,” Spence said of the teenagers. “They bring a really nice energy to

the garden — and I hope some of them will want to have their own plots next year.”

Most of the teens said they haven’t gardened before and relish the work.

“This is a new experience for me,” said Elianna, who will be a sophomore at Salem High School. “It’s fun watching things grow.”

“Community service is awesome,” said Ana Bojos, 15, also a sophomore.

The teens, all of whom are Hispanic, are participating in the Teen Outreach Program sponsored by Health Quarters, a community health and education organization in Beverly.

The program partnered with Grace Episcopal Church in Salem for a five-week summer session led by coordinator Ryan Heath, teaching the youths trust and communication skills and providing opportunities for community service.

“We learned about trust and working together as a group,” Ana said. “And actually being in the garden, we put it all together and make it work.”

The students built and painted three new benches for the community garden and are crafting a bilingual welcome sign, for which Crunchy Granola Baby donated money for materials.

Sending a message

When the garden thefts arose, it was a natural connection for the students to make the community plot.

“It’s a good message because the kids are also seeing we want to protect something that belongs to someone else,” said the Rev. Daniel Velez-Rivera, who leads Grace Church’s Hispanic ministry. “And, at the same time, we want to give something and help others.”

For the new plot, members of the garden are donating their excess plants, which the students are digging up and transplanting into the community plot outside the gates. It includes everything from broccoli and lettuce to sunflowers.

All the members of the youth group live in The Point neighborhood, near Palmer Cove Park. They attend Grace Episcopal Church, which launched a Hispanic ministry in 2007 and offers two Spanish language services weekly, on Sunday and Tuesday.

“The kids aren’t overbooked like a lot of their Anglo counterparts,” Velez-Rivera said, “so they’re looking to get involved. This has been a great summer partnership.”

Growing project

Salem Community Gardens, run by co-presidents Lisa Spence and Leslie Tuttle, manages the gardens in Mack Park and Palmer Cove with the approval of the city’s Parks, Recreation and Community Services Department.

Each garden has 69 plots. Residents pay a \$15 fee for a plot, which helps pay for fencing and soil preparation.

“The gardeners are very enthusiastic,” Spence said. “I hear a lot of comments about people meeting other people from the neighborhood they didn’t know, and making new friends, and that’s such an important part of this.”

To apply for a plot, visit www.salemcommunitygardens.org.

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