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Produce donated to assist local charitable causes

by LAKENDRA LEWIS

SCHERTZ — Master Gardener Dale Odvody will always remember the day a troubled teen walked through the Guadalupe County Community Garden's gate and left with a renewed purpose.

It was summer 2013 and the 16 year old, accompanied by other juvenile probationers, arrived for community-service duty. The adolescent had been expelled from four different schools.

Odvody, construction co-chairman for the Guadalupe County Master Gardeners, was digging a trench. The young man, tall and muscular, watched Odvody for a while, then asked if he could help.

The Master Gardener was pleasantly

surprised by his enthusiasm and allowed him to finish the backbreaking task, which took three laborious hours. As the boy left the garden to return to the Guadalupe County Juvenile Detention Center, he turned to Odvody.

"He said he had decided to go back and finish high school because he didn't want to dig ditches the rest of his life," Odvody said. "That just floored me. To hear something like that, if I never experience it again, makes coming out here worth it."

Week after week, since 2009, the community garden located behind the County Annex Building at 1101 Ebel Road has been planting seeds of inspiration in the many volunteers and passersby who have entered.

This year is proving to be no different. The volunteers — a mix of association members, residents and adult and juvenile probationers — faithfully maintain the land which yields produce donated to the Randolph Area Christian Assistance Program and the Immaculate Conception Catholic Church's food bank in Marion.

Twice weekly, Tuesdays and Fridays, the bounty is harvested, bagged, weighed and

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hand-delivered to the two agencies, recipients of more than nine tons of fresh provisions since partnering with the garden in 2011.

Jessie Fisher, RACAP program director, said being able to hand out quality fruit and veggies has been a blessing for the charity, which last year provided groceries to more than 1,300 area families.

"It's been a huge benefit for our clients because it means we can always provide them with something fresh, and that's important," Fisher said.

The community garden first took root at the suggestion of the Guadalupe County Master Gardeners, a nonprofit educational and volunteer program offered by the AgrLife Extension Service of the Texas A&M University System.

With the assistance of Guadalupe County Precinct 3 Commissioner Jim Wolverton — himself an avid green thumb — three-fourths of an acre was set aside for cultivation near the annex.

The spot currently contains 24 raised or elevated beds and 14 ground beds. The raised beds are demonstrations — or "demos" — to show folks what can be grown.

"We put (raised beds) in to show people you don't have to be able to crawl or bend over to have a vegetable garden," said Odvody who, along with his wife Ann, are 20-year Master Gardeners.

The area isn't open to the public to grow their own plots, but volunteers who want to cultivate existing demo beds 9 a.m. to noon on Tuesdays and Fridays.

"If you want to help us plant, weed and harvest, we will accept that," said Mary Bowe, a Master Gardener and co-founder of the community garden. "People drop by all the time. Everybody's welcome to come in when we're there."

John Lewicki, a 26-year Air Force veteran, has been lending a hand for nearly three years.

After retiring, Lewicki decided to



The Guadalupe County Community Garden at the County Annex in Schertz has become an educational center where people learn about the science of horticulture. Courtesy photos

pursue his love of gardening, a passion passed on to him by his grandmother who harvested her garden to feed the family during Lewicki's youth.

"I never really had a chance to garden, but I'd always enjoyed it," said Lewicki, a Cibolo resident, "and now it's something I do with my grandkids."

Another volunteer, Dan Kjolhede of Universal City, wanted to learn about horticulture so he could grow his own vegetables and frequent the nearby farmers markets.

"Gardening has made me very aware of how buying locally impacts the global environment. It's better for you and better for the community," he said.

In addition to sustaining the community garden, the Guadalupe County Master Gardeners' 140 certified members host a seminar each fall for aspiring horticulturalists wishing to join their ranks, and also holds classes for the YMCA and seniors during the summer.

For more, visit guadalupecountymastergardeners.org or call 830-372-3940.

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