

Kids grow baskets of butternuts

PAUL WINKELLER • JCG Spring 1985

ONE OF THE NICEST THINGS about being involved with ACGA is the constant exchange of inspiration and ideas. At the conclusion of our national conference two years ago, a group of us left San Jose for a tour of some community garden projects in San Francisco. I sat next to John Colgan from the Community Action Agency in Peoria, Illinois, and I discovered the breadth of the Peoria program was simply amazing. From community gardens to food pantries to market-scale growing with volunteers, they were addressing food issues at practically every step along the spectrum of growing, processing, and distribution. As John outlined one venture – a large-scale pumpkin growing project which relied on volunteer help – I began to develop a similar strategy for my own garden program in upstate New York.

Oakwood Back is a sprawling 2-acre garden located on the rural fringe of Troy, New York. It's what we affectionately call a "drive-away garden" – that is, all of the gardeners have to get in a car and drive there, a several mile jaunt from center city. Oakwood Back is never full and, since every gardener has a favorite spot, by mid-season the site is a messy crazy-quilt of neatly rowed plots, huge weeds, and an occasional patch of cover crop.

Explaining in our early spring newsletter that we needed one clear acre for growing food to give away, we bunched the gardeners closer together, which resolved our maintenance problem and created a tremendous opportunity in one fell swoop.

Getting volunteers for the project was the only major stumbling block. There was no way our one person staff could go out to Oakwood Back regularly to plant, cultivate, eventually harvest, and deal with our other fifteen gardens and permanent site developments.

We decided to approach two of our non-profit agency friends in the community. One of them, a relatively new group called PAHL House (Persons Aspiring For Healthy Lives), is a live-in rehabilitation center for teenagers with serious alcohol and substance abuse problems. PAHL House staff had previously asked us for space at one of our gardens near their residence. Gardening seemed like an ideal outdoor activity to balance the indoor therapy. In addition to the obvious benefits of exercise, good food, and social interaction, the therapists at PAHL House saw a clear parallel between learning to tend a growing garden and the slow, nurturing process of self-discovery the kids needed.

We suggested to PAHL House staff that our Food Pantry Growing Project took gardening therapy another step, this one right into the community. Here was a chance for kids who weren't feeling all that good about themselves to do something really tangible about the growing hunger problem in Troy.

We also suggested their involvement in the project might produce favorable publicity for their own fledging program.

And so, one morning in late spring after Oakwood Back had been freshly rotovated, we headed out with a dozen residents from PAHL House, each armed with a long-handled shovel. The sense of excitement in the air was palpable. We all lined up in a row, each one of us in the middle of the rotovator's 60-inch-wide swath. I gave one simple goal:

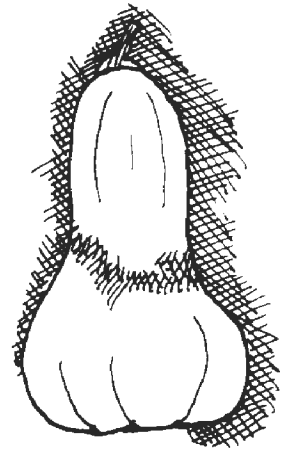
“Make a mound every five feet – just about the length of your shovel – and let's see how much we can accomplish today.”

Some of the PAHL House kids literally raced down their rows – so much pent-up energy from all those skull sessions! As we dug, one PAHL House resident wheeled around 50-pound bags of blood meal, giving each hill a shot of nitrogen. Later we would mulch with leaves. Incredibly enough, we were done with the hills in less than an hour – 750 of them! In less than another hour we had all the hills planted with a variety of winter squash.

Unity House is a much larger, very well-established non-profit that provides a variety of social services to low-income families, including running the food pantry where we planned to donate most of the squash. Volunteers from Unity House helped us maintain the site during the summer. We went back three weeks after planting to cultivate (using a rototiller followed by hand hoes), and then once more two weeks later. After that we let the site go until harvest time. It wasn't the neatest field of squash or the most productive. We didn't water or fertilize the entire summer. That didn't seem to matter one bit when we all returned for a big harvest party right after the first September frost, and gathered well over half a ton of beautiful winter squash.

Food Pantry Growing Project was 'good therapy' for everyone involved. The kids from PAHL House enjoyed every aspect of their involvement, especially the harvest and distribution, which they looked forward to with real pride and anticipation all summer long. We even think we might have made a few gardening converts in the crew, many of whom had no prior gardening experience. The project represents the creative coming-together of existing community resources and organizations to meet a common need – a classic example of way community garden programs benefit communities throughout North America.

When all three local television networks came to our office in response to our press releases announcing the great squash giveaway, we were overwhelmed and flabbergasted! There were representatives from a local senior citizen center carting away baskets full of butternuts, three-year-olds from a local daycare center marching down the street each happily clutching an acorn squash; and, of course, our friends from PAHL House and Unity House. It was a thrilling culmination, this mob scene, of months of work bringing all the different pieces together. 🍠



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