



FOOD & SOCIETY POLICY FELLOWS

Eye on the Environment: Volunteer Crew Relishes Creation of Edible Gardens

By David Goldstein, Mentions Rose Hayden-Smith

Ventura County News

November 1, 2008

Available online at: <http://www.venturacountystar.com/news/2008/nov/01/volunteer-crew-relishes-creation-of-edible/>

How do you get dozens of teens and adults to voluntarily landscape other people's backyards? Throw a party.

How do you get these energetic volunteers to not only provide labor, but also supply equipment, music, food and in some cases money? Give them something to believe.

The volunteers are motivated by a philosophy called "permaculture" and organized around a "movable feast" called the Grow Food Party Crew, which focuses on creating edible gardens. The group is the brainchild of Devin Slavin, a Ventura-based advocate of permaculture, combining "permanent" and "agriculture" in a way that promotes environmental principles.

Slavin traces his philosophical and gardening roots to the 1970s, when Australians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren came up with a set of principles and techniques designed to produce food, reduce energy use, conserve water and create beautiful landscapes. Mollison and Holmgren called their philosophy "permaculture" and dedicated themselves to sharing their beliefs and methods.

Since Slavin started Ventura County's first Grow Food Party Crew, branches of the gardening group have grown in Ojai and Santa Cruz. The Ojai group is headed by Dulanie Ellis, who also chairs the Food and Agriculture Committee of the Ojai Valley Green Coalition.

Two months ago, a joint event hosted by the Ventura and Ojai Grow Food Party Crews attracted 80 people to the Ojai Community Center. The group watched the YouTube debut of a documentary about their work and heard a lecture from Rose Hayden-Smith about World War II victory gardens.

Recently, the Grow Food Party Crew of Ventura hosted a workshop called "Essentials of Permaculture Garden Design." More than two dozen people paid \$25 to \$50 to attend a lecture at Ventura's Bell Arts Factory, then applied their permaculture principles to a backyard the next day. Rachel Morris, a local environmental activist known mostly for her work with VC COOL, a local nonprofit organization fighting climate change, was the recipient of the new garden.

The crew first shaped the ground of Morris' backyard, designing and building contours to capture runoff water and channel it into the garden. It then planted more than 200 fruits and vegetables, focusing on "companion planting," or placing plants into mutually beneficial groups where the shade and growth of



FOOD & SOCIETY POLICY FELLOWS

one benefits another. The plant choices also considered the principle of “time stacking.” For example, broccoli takes 100 days to flower, so next to it the crew planted radish and lettuce, which will grow and be harvested in time to give the broccoli room for growth.

Often, people benefiting from the new landscapes provide donations larger than the cost, but in cases where they cannot afford to pay, the group has organized a benefit concert, dessert tasting or other fundraiser at the host’s house. According to Slavin, average costs for a new 600-square-foot landscape are \$75 for plants, \$25 for compost and \$150 for irrigation.

The Grow Food Party Crew is willing to work anywhere — at a home, school, business or community organization. Slavin expects requests for the parties to quickly grow, saying, “Our society is growing to appreciate the abundance of nature.”

Listen to permaculture advocates long enough, and you might hear a dark undercurrent they are reluctant to acknowledge, a sort of doomsday/survivalist streak within their philosophy. Behind their joyous talk about harvesting nature’s abundance, their vision of neighborhoods’ providing their own food also considers, in Slavin’s words, “community resilience in a time when the economy isn’t doing well.”

The next Grow Food Party Crew event will be a big, citywide weekend party in Ventura featuring several groups, each creating multiple gardens. Organizers hope to create 100 new gardens in one weekend.

The event, called “Growing Gardens of Gratitude,” will take place on the weekend before Thanksgiving, Nov. 21-23. If you’d like to keep your eye on the environment by learning permaculture while volunteering, contact event organizers at growfoodpartycrew@gmail.com.

On the Net:

<http://groups.google.com/group/grow-food-party-crew-ventura>

<http://transitioncalifornia.ning.com>

David Goldstein is an environmental resource analyst for the county of Ventura. Representatives of government or nonprofit agencies that want to submit articles on environmental topics for this column should contact Goldstein at 658-4312 or david.goldstein@ventura.org.