

Brunswick hunger program rakes in a heavy harvest

BY WALTER WUTHMANN
THE FORECASTER

BRUNSWICK — Mother Nature smiled upon the Midcoast Hunger Prevention Program's community garden this year.

Volunteer gardeners pulled more than 2,600 pounds of vegetables out of the ground this fall, and then sent the produce down the road to MCHPP's food pantry and kitchen.

Standing in the bustling food bank at MCHPP's Union Street headquarters Tuesday morning, Program Director Ethan Minton listed what had already been eaten, and what was still going out.

"The carrots have mostly been used," he said. "But we still have boxes and boxes of squash ... those will be distributed in the pantry and go out in Thanksgiving baskets."

The sting of onions floated through the air from the kitchen, as volunteers diced them for beef and black bean chili being served for lunch.

MCHPP's Common Good Garden is a collaboration

with the Brunswick-Topsham Land Trust. When BTLT established its 82-plot Tom Settlemire community garden in 2012 at Crystal Spring Farm, it offered 5,000 square feet to Midcoast Hunger, according to Claudia LaBella Adams, vice chairwoman of MCHPP's Board of Directors.

The two programs secured grants from Bowdoin College, the Harvard Pilgrimage Healthy Food Fund, and Maine Women's Giving Tree to fund a garden coordinator position to lead volunteers and operations at the site.

In its first three years of growing, the garden produced more than 6,700 pounds of food for the hunger prevention program, according to BTLT's website.

This year, about 45 volunteers spent more than 400 hours planting, growing and harvesting vegetables for the program, coordinator Corie Washow said.

"This program is so multi-leveled," Adams said Tuesday. "The most tangible benefit is the food. ... (We get) fresh, organic, nu-

tritious produce for the clients."

But in addition, the garden program reaches "so many levels of the community, community with a capital 'C,'" she added.

Adams said the presence of MCHPP volunteers at the farm "raises awareness of hunger" in Brunswick.

"A lot of nonprofits operate in vacuums," but the collaboration with BTLT is "a natural marriage," she said. "It raises the profile of both of our organizations."

The harvest this year brought more than just vegetables to Midcoast Hunger. On Friday, Oct. 16, former U.S. Sen. George Mitchell toured MCHPP's food bank, pantry and kitchen.

Mitchell, a Waterville native, has recently started addressing the issue of childhood hunger in Maine. During his visit to the Brunswick pantry, according to Minton, Mitchell met with a client and her two children.

"She's doing everything she can to make the best of very difficult circumstances," Minton said Mitchell later told him. "With a cou-



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Chef Winnie Chen (from left) and volunteers Rika VanWilligen and Judy Reynolds prepare carrots from the Common Good Garden for lunch recently at the Midcoast Hunger Prevention Program in Brunswick.

ple of twists in the road, that could have been me."

MCHPP provides food assistance to 1,200 families a year, according to the orga-

nization's website.

At lunch Wednesday, volunteers used up some of the last of the community garden's carrots, shaving

them for a salad.

But "there's still a lot of squash," Minton said. "There's always a lot of

Garlic

Continued from Page C1

I think they should buy them from Fedco or some reputable seed company. I know that when I sell to Fedco, my garlic heads have to be at least 2 inches in diameter. Sometimes they're 3 inches. They're big. They're giant. You shouldn't get them from the grocery store. You're not sure where that garlic was grown. It might not thrive in your climate. I would go local. And the bigger the clove, the bigger the head, the bigger the return. I know the Red Russian variety does really well. A few other types do OK, too.

OK, I'll go find some good local garlic. Now what?



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October's an ideal month to plant garlic, says Meredith Coffin of Wild Cat Farm in Freedom.

You can have the best-looking garlic, but if you put it in poor soil or too acidic, it won't do well. It likes good soil. I pay attention to the pH of the land.

I'm in the process of liming my soil, and my husband will till it in. When I plant, I'll plant with some amendments, such as bone char, something that supposedly

helps the root find necessary minerals.

Once the soil seems ready, do I just tuck the cloves in the ground for the winter?

When the soil is fluffy, I just plunge the cloves in. They end up 6 inches underneath the ground, and each clove is about 8 inches apart. The pointy side has to face up, and the root side of the clove has to go down. It does matter. Garlic will turn itself upside down and will come up, but it will use a lot of its energy doing that.

All planted! What's next?

We mulch it at the end. We can use lots of things to mulch. If you shred your leaves, that makes a beautiful mulch. I don't have a shredder, so I always go back to hay with no seed in it.

Growing

Continued from Page C1

contributes to saving the planet and saving heirloom seeds and saving us from chemicals, the way it's cool and trendy and rewarding — but then what? When there are rows and rows of beautiful canned tomatoes and exotic chutneys and spicy sage jam and peach honey gracing your pantry shelves, it's tempting to sit back on your heels and feel smug about your work for the season being done.

But now you have to eat it. And for people who are accustomed to preparing and eating food that is uniformly packaged and universally available, that is hard.

I remember my master food preserving instructor telling the class to "be sure to can and freeze only what your family will eat." At the time I thought, "duh." Of course.

But like so many people who like to preserve food and no doubt formed the aggregate which inspired my instructor to offer such basic-sounding advice, I got swept off my feet by the need to can everything.

And I mean everything. I had a bumper crop of zucchini that year. I could have tried to give them away, but it has been my experience that when I am having a good year for a certain crop or a bad year for another, most people I know are having parallel successes and failures. I could have just composted the squash or fed it to animals, but that just feels wrong. In the same way that people don't accept just enough of their salary to pay their bills that month and then discard the remainder, I wasn't inclined to throw out any food simply because I couldn't eat it up immediately.

Because there are no recipes for safely canning summer squash by itself, I used a recipe from the Ball book to can zucchini in pineapple juice. Sure, I had to go out and buy pineapple juice in cans specifically for this project — which flew in the face of my commitment to buy only local and minimize packaging waste — but I consoled myself with the fact that I was using up my zucchini.

We had young steers that next winter, and it turned out they loved home-canned zucchini in pineapple juice. It was a good thing, because nobody else liked it at all. And we had a ton of it.

I should have listened to my instructor's advice, which was to enjoy zucchini while it's in season and let it go when it's gone.

I have come to learn that the ephemeral nature of home-grown food is not only not a barrier to enjoying it, but is actually one of the best parts. I love the way we spend a week or two drowning in fresh baby chard — braised, au gratin, on pizza, mixed with sausage and pasta and flash fried — and then come up for air briefly before being sucked under by the abundance of some other garden delight. We have corn week and cabbage week at my house and enjoy sides of tomatoes and green beans and broccoli all summer long.

It has been a steep learning curve. I had to change my whole way of thinking about food, starting with menu planning. Most people nowadays decide what they want to eat, then go buy the ingredients to make it. As a homesteader, I reverse those steps. I look at what I have on hand — the stuff I worked so hard to grow and preserve — and plan my meals around that, buying only what I need to fill in the gaps.

Like so many people who like to preserve food and no doubt formed the aggregate which inspired my instructor to offer such basic-sounding advice, I got swept off my feet by the need to can everything. And I mean everything.

The other big challenge was learning to cook. I've been a recipe follower all my life, and it has worked well overall. I read the recipes, made a list of what I need — a 6.2 ounce can of this, a 14 ounce frozen bag of that — and bought it.

It didn't matter to me that the recipe called for apples and I was making it in April or asparagus in November.

I have been forced to make modifications. Betty Crocker and Mark Bittman don't call for 8 ounce jars of homemade tomatillo salsa or a zip-top bag of frozen broccoli.

I've had to figure out how to substitute what looks yummy in the recipe with something equally delectable from my larder. Peach chutney is a thing of beauty, but incorporating it into everyday meals isn't always easy.

Preserved food sometimes gets eaten in waves, as well. For example, if spring is approaching and we still haven't eaten many of the parsnips that we harvested and froze last April, nobody is surprised to find a lot of them on the menu — fried in butter or added to soups or snuck into a pot of mashed potatoes.

If you are one who is contemplating growing your own food or you did so this year, I applaud your endeavors. And if you are taking it a step further by preserving some of your garden bounty, even better. But remember — put up only what you'll eat, shop in your own storage room before hitting the grocery store and happy eating.

Kathy Bernier has been backyard farming since 2007, raising her own, saving up for hard times, rejecting consumerism and hugging the land. Read more about her adventures at The Practical Prepsteader at practicalprepsteader.bangordailynews.com.

Cheese

Continued from Page C1

was merged into the Aroostook-County based potato company, which he said is substantially larger than the creamery. Now, while the cheese is made at the New Gloucester dairy, it is moved up to the company's Mars Hill facility to be stored, cut and packaged. About 30 people work in the cheese part of the company, he said. Another part of the Pineland Farms Inc. family of businesses is Pineland Farms Natural Meats, which came about when Libra purchased the Wolfe's Neck Farm beef operation in 2005.

"The cheese company is very solid. It specializes in high-end products," Hagggett said. "We're hoping and we're working toward continued growth. We want the business to grow, and we expect to be reaching out further with our sales nationally."

That would likely benefit the Maine cheese industry as a whole, according to Eric Rector, the president of the Maine Cheese Guild and the owner of the Monroe Cheese Studio.

"The success of Pineland Farms is good. They create visibility, as Cabot does in Vermont," he said. "Pineland gets the word out. 'Hey, they're making cheese in Maine.' It's a great flag for Maine cheese, even though what they're doing is very different from the rest of us."

That opinion isn't universally shared, though. Lucien Smith of the Smith Family Farm in Bar Harbor said that he first learned about Pineland Farms Creamery when he found a menu from a Mount Desert Island restaurant that had blown onto his field. Pineland Farms was mentioned as the provider of a cheese for the local cheese plate.

"I'm scratching my head," Smith, whose wife, Maggie, makes bloomy-rind cheeses at their small farm, said. "I didn't know where Pineland Farms was. How local could it be?"

He looked into the Maine company, and thought that its roots as a nonprofit run by a foundation with deep pockets gave it an unfair ad-



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Pineland Farms cheese (above, below) is seen for sale at Tiller & Rye in Brewer recently.



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vantage over other, smaller Maine cheesemakers that don't have the resources to build top-of-the-line dairies to make their products.

"It's competing in the same market space. I don't know how it can't be an unfair competition," he said.

Rector said that the cheesemaking scene in Maine has changed a lot since the 19th century. At that time, creameries were built in many towns and cities as a place for dairy farmers to bring their raw milk and turn it into something more shelf-stable. The state had a large tradition of cheesemaking. But that shifted at the beginning of the 20th century, when many of the town creameries shut down and the state lost a lot of its cheesemaking traditions.

"There was not a lot of cheese, until the back-to-landers came in the 1970s and a bunch of them got dairy animals. That's when the modern cheesemaking history of Maine begins," he said. "With pioneers in the

back-to-the-land movement getting a few goats."

In the last 30 years, the numbers of licensed Maine cheesemakers has risen from just eight cheesemakers in the mid-1990s to 72 today, a number that is a lot larger than the 48 cheesemaking members of the Vermont Cheese Council. However, Maine produces much less cheese — roughly 1 million pounds annually, Rector said. About 750,000 pounds of that is made by Pineland Farms, he said. The low production and high numbers of cheesemakers ought to mean there is room to grow, he said.

"Right now — including Pineland Farms — is producing less than 3 percent of the total cheese that Mainers consume each year," he said. "There's a tremendous potential for growth."

But the hardship he and other Maine cheesemakers face is that it is a fairly young industry here, and the basic infrastructure is still being developed.