

## Spirit in Action Gardening

Spirit in Action Sunday, February 27, 2011

By Rene Castle

I have had a vegetable garden for several years now. I am not an expert gardener, but I am getting better. The act of gardening is a spiritual and collaborative activity that reminds me of my connection with the earth. It is working with the earth, with nature, with God to create something together. I don't try to *make* the plants do anything. We do it together and the plant provides the magic. The gardener's job is to figure out what the plant needs, provide it, and then just allow it to become what it already wants to be. If I do it right and have a bit of luck, at the end of this amazing process there is food. The plant does the heavy lifting and I reap the harvest. I am humbly grateful to part of this natural process.

When gardening is taken out of the backyard and into the community, there are even more benefits:

- **Community Gardening builds relationships.** Last summer, I took a gardening class with the Gardeners of Eden (more formally known as the Ashland-Cherryland Garden and Arts Network) to learn how to design and grow edible gardens. Two of the people who spearheaded and participated in the class, Ruth and Mike Baratta, are here with us today. Sara Weihmann, someone far wiser than her youth would suggest, led our class. Because there is far more than any one person can know about gardening, even Sara, the class was a collaborative effort from the beginning. There were beginners who had never grown anything. There were intermediate people, like myself, who have had moderately successful gardens, but still have more to learn than to teach. And then there were a few who were an inspiration to us all. People like Charles Woody, a Cherryland icon, who always smiles and refers to his bees as his girls. He and his wife, Barbara, have a wonderful garden here in Cherryland and they were a true wealth of information. We learned together, we worked together, we got to know each other, and we became friends.
- **Community Gardening provides healthy food.** San Lorenzo, Ashland and Cherryland have among the highest rates of nutrition-related morbidity in Alameda County. These communities have no real grocery stores and many residents get their food from mini-marts and liquor stores. Having locally grown organic fresh produce available provides the people in our neighborhoods with healthy food without breaking their budget. Michelle Obama started an organic garden at the White House to promote healthy eating and reduce childhood obesity. Additionally, food is healthier and safer when it is grown and eaten by people who know each other.
- **Community Gardening is good for the planet.** Do you know how far the food on your plate has traveled and how many gallons of fossil fuel that took? Were pesticides and fertilizers used? Because of government policies and subsidies, an apple imported to California from New Zealand is often less expensive than an apple from the historic apple-growing area of Sebastopol, an hour and a half from here. It is estimated that the average American meal travels about 1500 miles to get from farm to plate. Local food means less transportation costs and a smaller carbon footprint. With dwindling fossil fuel supplies and rising prices, community agriculture means food security. And finally, organic food means no pesticides or fertilizer contaminating our land or water.
- **Community Gardening provides local jobs.** Dig Deep Farms, our local community-supported agriculture (CSA), currently provides ten part-time positions for our youth. Dig Deep Farms is one of the great programs sponsored by the Deputy Sheriff's Activities League (DSAL). They have several small farm sites in San Leandro and they deliver fresh food to my door once a week at a reasonable price. You can see the "small box" I received this week after the service. I encourage all of you to participate in a CSA and especially Dig Deep Farms.

Community gardening is rewarding both spiritually and practically. It connects us to each other and the earth, provides food that is good for people and the planet, and provides local employment. The newest gardener has something to offer and the most experienced gardener has something to learn. All are welcome here.

If this sounds like something you would like to be part of, please visit the information table later. You can learn about different Ashland-Cherryland Garden and Arts Network activities like the much-anticipated arrival of Mandela MarketPlace, which creates a food supply chain connecting rural farmers and low income communities. Also, you can help Alliene Turner and myself design and create a garden here at

Eden UCC in the space behind Pioneer Chapel. There are beds to build and plants to be planted. Carrots, potatoes, broccoli, squash, spinach, beans, berries, or kale—what would you like to grow in Eden's garden?