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Group turning unused property into produce

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Small, large and medium plots of land can become a growing ground for weeds, but a group of students from Chico State University would like the chance to turn those unused areas of soil into community-oriented vegetable gardens.

The group is called GRUB -- Growing Resourcefully Uniting Bellies. Co-organizer Francine Stuelpnagel explained that most of the volunteers have been active with the sustainability efforts on the Chico State campus.

She and students Dresden Holden, Lee Callendar and Max Kee, along with several others, thought putting their backs into the effort would be a way to produce food locally.

The benefits to the environment are many, Stuelpnagel explained. Home-grown vegetables can be grown without chemicals. Transporting food doesn't use resources, especially since the group intends to deliver the food by foot or by bike. Plus, there's a sense of community when the food on your table was grown just doors down the street.

Most of the neighborhoods in the Chico area were built on some of the best soil in the valley, which makes the area ideal for small urban gardens.

Stuelpnagel said she, Holden and Callendar rode bicycles all the way to Santa Barbara a month ago to attend a sustainability conference.

Along the way, they stopped at a community service garden and were inspired. They talked about how nice it would be to have a farm, but as students they had no space.

They also ran into some students from San Jose who had started a project using empty space in people's yards.

They were sitting on the beach talking about "solution-oriented projects," and decided to start the local effort.

Their plan — so far they have set up three gardens — is to solicit volunteers with land. Crews from her project will come in and work the land. They'll bring in locally produced compost to make the soil more fertile, set up a drip irrigation system and a timer. Stuelpnagel said some in the group also have chickens, so the manure will be used as an extra boost to the newly planted gardens.

Volunteers will also stop by periodically and yank out weeds.

The property owner pays for the water and gets a share of the produce. The rest of the food is distributed in the neighborhood, via bicycle.

They'll try to group plantings for maximum efficiency. For example, one plot might be planted just in potatoes, while another will be all salad greens.

Stuelpnagel said the work is very labor-intensive, especially taking out existing grass or weeds.

The group is starting out with people they know until word spreads.

One woman who volunteered her yard told organizers she loved gardens, but didn't have time to work on one. When the students remade her yard into a garden, she became inspired and planted a tangerine tree, Stuelpnagel said.

The gardens can be worked most of the year. Right now they're putting in fall crops such as leeks, onions, potatoes, greens, beets and garlic.

Recipients of the food will be asked for donations to pay for supplies for more gardens.

In the future, group members hope to be able to apply for grant funding to help supply more materials for growing.

In the meantime, they're hoping to bring in money through fundraising.

The group is also looking for donations of soaker hoses, seeds and plants from people's homes or nurseries.

For more information, call 894-8547.

A benefit for the community gardening group GRUB is planned at 7 p.m. Friday at the Peace and Justice Center, 526 Broadway. The benefit will include a \$5 curry dinner, and live music by Dick and Jane and Dave Mulligan. For more information, e-mail: chicamanzana@care2.com or dresden@mail2world.com.

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