

Produce for the hungry gleaned from Danville yards

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DANVILLE -- It's a typical sight in this fertile valley -- a tree dripping with plums, apricots scattered across the yard, more figs than one has recipes for.

Knowing that this scene is all-too-common outside many windows, some fruitful minds are devising ways to keep the bounty from going to waste.

Enter Sustainable Danville -- partnered with The Urban Farmers, the organizations aim to provide healthy fare to the hungry by gleaning (harvesting excess or unused crops) from residents' teeming trees and donating the crop to the Food Bank of Contra Costa, Loaves & Fishes family kitchen and Monument Crisis Center's food pantry.

Organizers say that despite food bank efforts to collect nutrient-rich fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes, processed offerings are often par for the course. Requests for nonperishable items frequently yield carbohydrate-laden foods high in preservatives, sodium, sugar and calories, making them less than desirable offerings, especially for people with high blood pressure, diabetes and other diet-related health problems. At the same time, they're more readily available than healthy offerings that come with a shelf life.

With this reality comes a vexing question: How to get healthy, local food to our communities at a cost that makes the project possible across multiple communities?

Sustainable Danville and The Urban Farmers seek to answer that question by looking to our own backyards. Project coordinators invite residents to register their trees to be harvested by crews of eight to 10 volunteers, whose goal is to collect 1,000 pounds of fruit per day.

"We will provide trucks and ladders to the volunteer crews, who will visit five properties every Saturday," said Cindy Egan, director of Sustainable Danville's fruit-gleaning effort. "Each tree will be picked once a season, though the project will take place year-round."

In addition to recruiting trees and fruit-harvesters, the project is also enlisting "tree spotters," volunteers who tour the community spotting homes with bountiful trees and leaving fliers inviting residents to register.

"The single biggest challenge we face is to get a high density of trees registered in each service area," said Siamack Sioshansi, executive director of The Urban Farmers. "By registering as many homes as possible in Danville, we can maximize the use of volunteers' time, the size of each harvest and minimize travel."

Project coordinators hope to kick off the effort sometime in late August once more trees are registered -- just in time to harvest some apples.

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"Right now, we're in the middle of pit-fruit season -- peaches and plums. Fall brings yields of apples and pears; with winter comes citrus; and cherries and apricots are harvested in the spring," The Urban Farmers also hope to expand their efforts to coordinate with Sustainable Lafayette, thus replicating the project in other communities.

"A closer inspection of the problem revealed that the coordination efforts required to keep a gleaning organization on track are so intensive that most groups did not last long," Sioshansi said. "While we don't expect our local efforts to be anything more than a dent in the face of hunger in America, we believe that the collective actions of many communities may deliver a punch."

To register your tree or volunteer with the fruit-gleaning project, visit www.sustainabledanville.com.