

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Contra Costa volunteer fruit pickers come to the rescue

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Last November, Charlotte Sturgeon watched helplessly as about 100,000 pounds of persimmons rotted on the 812 trees her late husband had planted on their 36-acre Vacaville-area orchard.

She tried to give away as many as possible, and Sturgeon learned to make persimmon bread, muffins, salads -- and to eat the high-fiber, antioxidant-rich fruit for breakfast, lunch and dinner.

"I have a whole cookbook with things you can do with persimmons -- and I've probably tried all of them," Sturgeon said in an interview. "Still, so many just sat on the tree and died. I was determined that this year, that wasn't going to happen."

This year -- this weekend -- there will be an army of pickers going through Sturgeon's trees.

The general, so to speak, is Siamack Sioshansi, the founder of The Urban Farmers, a Lafayette-based all-volunteer nonprofit with a mission to feed healthy food to as many people as possible. The grass-roots organization gleans unwanted or excess fresh produce from backyards, farms and orchards and delivers it to hunger relief agencies.

"We have a massive harvest that will take place Nov. 16," he said in an email. "Massive enough to feed fruit to 10,000 people for a day. It normally takes a full year for us to harvest this much fruit."

The goal, Sioshansi said, is to pick 50,000 pounds of fruit, the most Urban Farmers has ever tried to harvest in one day. And he has help arriving in abundance.

"We have 100 volunteers from Saint Mary's College, 100 from UC Davis, 50 from Diablo Valley College and a busload of students from The Athenian School in Danville," he said. Also, Charter Pros is donating the bus; Moraga Hardware & Lumber has offered 100 picking poles; Concord-based Loaves and Fishes is lending a truck and tools; and the Food

Bank of Contra Costa and Solano counties is providing containers for transporting the harvested crop.

Sioshansi says volunteers from local churches will help serve lunch from Whole Foods Market to the pickers.

With all that, there's still a profound need for donations of money and equipment to make the harvest a success.

Sturgeon found Sioshansi through one of the people she'd sought for help. Sioshansi recently visited Sturgeon's property, and the number of trees was daunting, he said. With the fruit already ripe, and despite the bottlenecks he foresaw -- and against his own better judgment -- he began calling in the cavalry.

Since her husband Ronald's death in 2006, Sturgeon had tried taking some of the winter fruit to Vallejo, where she'd worked as a nurse until her recent retirement. She also recruited her son Douglas to help harvest and donate bushfuls to a food bank in San Jose.

Sturgeon says she has no idea why her husband planted the trees. "He thought persimmons were a wonderful thing," she said. "I was mystified. If I could find out why, I'd like to know," she says.

She's beyond wondering now -- now, she's happy.

"I want the fruit to go to somebody who can use it," Sturgeon said. " Sioshansi told me he'd need an army to make that happen; I guess he found one."

Persimmon harvest

The harvest at Charlotte Sturgeon's Solano County orchard is Saturday, Nov. 16 from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. To learn more, to donate or to sign up to volunteer, go to www.theurbanfarmers.org/persimmon-harvest/