

Danville food bank nursery to open June 1

By Beth Jensen Correspondent

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ALAMO -- A mother-daughter team who dreamed of creating a community garden to feed the needy have harvested and donated their first crop.

A public grand opening for Bounty Garden will be held June 1 at Hap Magee Ranch Park on the Alamo-Danville border. The project began two years ago, when Heidi Abramson's daughter, Amelia, now 18, was a sophomore at the Athenian School. She had volunteered at the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano, and become aware of the need for donated food, even in affluent areas such as Alamo.

"It dawned on her that food insecurity is in all neighborhoods, no matter how well the general situation seems to be," Heidi Abramson said. "There are people temporarily relying on it, those who



Heidi Abramson, right, and her daughter, Amelia, left, in the Bounty Garden at Hap Magee Ranch Park in Danville, Calif. on Sunday, May 19, 2013. Last year they started the garden along with a host of volunteers. The vegetables grown are going to the food bank. (Jim Stevens/Bay Area News Group)

have lost jobs, are growing older, whose checks have been cut back, who have developed AIDS and many, many more reasons. One night she said the whole solution was to have everyone come together, and that's where the real idea was born."

The two formed a nonprofit foundation, eventually obtaining a licensing arrangement with the Danville Town Council to allow them to establish a garden in the area behind the Swain House in the park on La Gonda Way. In addition to growing food exclusively for donation, the arrangement requires Bounty Garden to provide community education in organic

gardening, in the hope volunteers will take their new skills home to grow food for their families or for donation. The project is volunteer-driven, with local scouts and students among those helping to build the 24 raised beds, instill irrigation and refurbish one of two old barns on the site. Estimated annual costs of \$2,500 are expected to be paid through fundraisers and donations.

"The Hap Magee site encompasses everything we had on our wish list -- it's in a public location, we can have classes that take place, there's a children's park and a dog park," Abramson added. "There's also public exposure that affords us a long-term source of volunteers. We wanted longevity -- something that would go on past us."

The garden's first volunteers planted an inaugural test crop last October to make sure soil and irrigation conditions were adequate. The cabbage, broccoli and chard were a success and will now be followed by three main plantings each year -- one warm-season and two cool-season harvests. Each bed is assigned seasonally to an individual or a family of volunteers, who are responsible for choosing their crops, buying the seed, growing and transplanting the seedlings, monitoring the plants at least weekly, and harvesting the crop. Experienced gardeners give instruction in seedling management, composting and harvesting, although gardeners can opt to buy already-sprouted seedlings if they desire.

While many individuals and groups donate to the needy, Bounty Garden is unique in its purpose, said Lisa Sherrill, community relations manager for the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano.

"We do have some community gardens that will donate to us, but this is the only one I know that is set up to donate exclusively to the food bank," she said. "It's a really neat way to teach people to grow their own food and a huge benefit to the food bank."

The food bank distributed about 16 million pounds of food to a wide variety of agencies in both counties last year, Sherrill said. One-third of that amount was fresh produce, which always is in high demand. Food bank officials hope fresh food eventually will make up 50 percent of donations, she said.

"Fresh produce can be expensive, and is not always accessible in all the neighborhoods we serve," she said. "Bounty Garden provides a variety that maybe we might not necessarily have since we purchase in bulk. They gave us one delivery of beautiful Swiss chard that we were thrilled to have."

Wendy and Erik Bjeldanes, of Danville, are among Bounty Garden's first volunteers. Erik built and donated a seedling box for the garden and the couple's children, Megan, 13, Justin,

11 and Adam, 8. The children helped grow seedlings and transplant them into bed number three, now filled with Swiss chard. The family has put its new skills to good use at home.

"I don't have a green thumb; I'd always wanted to garden, but it was daunting," Wendy Bjeldanes said. "Now, we've built four (growing) beds in our back yard ... put in sprinklers and we're growing whatever Bounty Garden is growing. We've gotten a composter from the waste management authority and are replicating that into our everyday living. So (Bounty Garden) is not just benefiting other people; it's benefiting our family."

Learning how to grow organic vegetables for others, then taking that knowledge home to produce food for a family -- or to continue donating it to the needy -- is the perfect ending Heidi Abramson and her daughter Amelia always hoped for.

"They've done good for somebody else, and now they have control of this and can do it at home," she added. "It's so rewarding."

bounty garden

grand opening

When: 10 a.m. Saturday, June 1

Where: Hap Magee Ranch Park, 1025 La Gonda Way, Danville

Events: Visitors will be able to view the growing beds, speak with gardeners and get details on organic gardening classes and how to register to become a Bounty Garden participant. Speakers will include Danville Mayor Newell Arnerich and Larry Sly, Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano's director.

Cost: Free, open to the public

Details: <http://thebountygarden.wordpress.com/>

Donate: Donations of fresh produce or other food goods may be dropped off at Bounty Garden for pickup by the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano. For details, contact the food bank at 855-309-3663 or www.foodbankccs.org