

Volunteers help at Harvest Time at Potawot

by Maureen McGarry



Joe Ormand picking apples

If you're traveling along Janes Road in Arcata, take a turn onto Weott Way and head toward the United Indian Health Village. You will be entering the Ku'wah-dah-wilth Restoration Area on 20 acres of the former river delta for the Mad River. An easy, level path will take you through the wildlife sanctuary and eventually lead to the west side of the property. There you will find Potawot Community Food Garden abundant with produce of all kinds. Over two acres of the restored wetland are planted with various fruit trees and berries, fresh herbs, colorful flowers and a wide range of vegetables. Throughout the week, you will see volunteers working in the greenhouses full of tomatoes or in the rows of greens.

"The farm opened in 2000," says Ed Mata, Gardening and Food Resource Specialist for United Indian Health Services (UIHS). "We had to amend the soil with gypsum and cover crops for the first 5 years. It had been filled with clay that was moved here to divert the flow of the Mad River many years ago."

The garden has been supplying the local Native American community with fresh produce ever since. The produce is made available at UIHS at twice weekly produce stands during the main growing season. Produce is also provided for meetings and special events at the Health Center.

According to Barbara Pfeifer, the Diabetes Program Manager, and Interim Operations Manager for the Del Norte Clinic, "People who have CalFresh can get fresh produce. UIHS clients who go through the Diabetes Prevention Program get a \$10 voucher (veggie-bucks) every 2 weeks. All of our diabetes grants are federal grants that help supplement the garden."

Pfeifer says they are always looking for innovative ways to teach people how to eat healthily. "We consider ourselves to be a demonstration site. We try to keep it local and teach people how to become self-sufficient and grow their own garden in order to promote food security. Other Native agencies come to learn from our model."

One of the main reasons Potawot is doing well is because of volunteer help. "Volunteers are crucial and we have great volunteers who have been with us for a while."

Mata says, "The number one reason volunteers come here is because they want to help the Indian community. The food goes directly to the clients."

On this past Thursday morning, in the apple orchard, RSVP volunteer Joe Ormond was up on a ladder picking apples. Out in the garden, RSVP volunteer Margo Barnard was weeding around the blueberry plants. No one was standing idle.

"It is the height of the season," said Tee Griffin, another UIHS Garden Specialist, and the garden's bee expert. Pfeifer says that Griffin's expertise with bees has helped increase the volume of produce.

“Just about everything is ready,” says Griffin. This is a great time of year to become involved. If a volunteer sets up a schedule and commits, they receive fresh veggies from the garden. The harvest is abundant and there’s always extra.”

Griffin is hoping for more volunteers to sign up. “We will continue through the fall and the winter. We have all kinds of indoor projects as well. Everyone thinks we go on vacation. But we’re here.”

Mata and Griffin simultaneously agree. “Our mission is that good food is good medicine.”

Both emphasize that Potawot is a pleasant place to work, not only because of the beauty of the garden, but also because of the camaraderie. “It’s like a little family here.”

For more information about volunteering at Potawot Community Food Garden, call Ed or Tee at 826-8476, or contact Volunteer Center of the Redwoods/RSVP at 442-3763.

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*Val Lovelace, Ed Mata, and Judy Aronoff
sorting apples*