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MIZZOU

Growing Seeds, Meeting Needs

Retired alumni turn gardening hobby into a cornucopia for food pantries.



Penny (left) and Sandy Davis (right) run Seed 2 Need, a gardening project that started in their backyard and has since grown to 2 acres, producing more than 42,000 pounds of food in 2013 for local food assistance programs in Sandoval and Bernalillo (N.M.) counties. Their daughter Leslie (middle) has helped them since the beginning in 2008 with naming the project, designing the logo, maintaining the social media sites and taking pictures as well as planting, weeding and harvesting. Photo courtesy of the Davises.

Story by Erik Potter

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A afraid they'd become bored in retirement, Sandy and Penny Davis decided to plant a 20-by-20 garden where they could spend some time digging around and harvesting tomatoes and green chilies to give to the local food pantry. It was 2008; the economy was convulsing, and Penny says she knew a lot of people who were unemployed and could use the food.

Sandy, BS BA '76, had just retired after a career as a general contractor. Penny, Bus '76, had been an accountant and project manager at an electric company. Both were accustomed to working hard and getting things done. Both were also longtime gardeners, stretching back to their student days.

Despite good growing conditions, both were shocked at how quickly their backyard garden in Corrales, N.M., grew.

Over the past four years, the couple has given away 180,000 pounds of food to 15 food assistance programs in surrounding Sandoval and Bernalillo counties, including to food pantries, a local food bank, and various women's and homeless shelters. The 400-square-foot plot has grown to 2 acres on donated land and two 60-tree orchards. Their volunteer email list has 350 names on it.

They grow cucumbers, tomatoes, squash, green beans, carrots, zucchini, cantaloupe, watermelons, apples, peaches, pears and a whole lot of green chilies. “In New Mexico, green chilies are a staple,” Penny says. “[And] if all you’re eating is rice and beans, you want something to season it.”

A late frost in 2013 ruined the fruit crop and kept them from beating 2012’s 65,238-pound record harvest.

“We had no idea what we were getting ourselves into,” Penny says.

Since their informal start, the couple has created a formal charitable organization, Seed 2 Need, complete with a board of directors, so people can donate money to pay for the hand tools, irrigation system, liability insurance and other materials that go along with running a small-scale farm. Operating costs are about \$3,500 an acre. Last year, donations paid for the materials to build a greenhouse. All the labor, including Sandy and Penny’s, is volunteered.

Although they don’t donate food directly to the people who need it, Sandy and Penny — both number crunchers — get satisfaction from measuring with their scale the impact they’re making and watching that number grow larger. “We weigh everything we distribute and know exactly how many pounds of tomatoes and cucumbers we sent out on trucks,” Penny says.

They also enjoy the community of like-minded people they've built among their core volunteers who regularly help plant, weed and harvest the garden.

“My daughter calls the garden a [jerk] filter,” says Sandy, using a more colorful phrase. “People who you don't want to be friends with don't come out because it's a lot of work.”

Although they don't plan to make their own garden bigger, they hope their story will inspire others to create gardens of their own. “It's the perfect opportunity to help the community and help people who are unemployed get some fresh produce,” Penny says. “It'd be a great Boy Scout, Girl Scout or 4-H project.”

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