

Harvesting for good: Mitzvah Garden continues to help others while finding ways to be ‘green’ and sustainable



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Written by Barbara Bayer, Editor



Skylar Devins (left) and Deko Ricketts harvest garlic at the Mitzvah Garden. Photo by Rachel Beren

There’s always something to talk about at the Mitzvah Garden Kansas City.

Weather is always a hot topic (pun intended), but the biggest news this year is the completion of the fourth stage of its sustainability project.

Now in its 15th year, the first three stages of Mitzvah Garden’s sustainability project were gathering leaves from local landscapers that have been turned into nutrient-rich mulch; maintaining multiple beehives providing the garden and surrounding neighborhood with pollination; and capturing, storing and broadcasting 6,000 gallons of rain water. The fourth stage, added just this spring, was installing and using an array of solar panels to power the garden’s elaborate drip irrigation system.

Andrew Kaplan, one of the garden’s three co-chairmen along with Larry Lehman and Ken Sonnenschein, said the solar panel project became a reality with a grant from KCP&L. Kaplan said Mitzvah Garden volunteer Peter Loftspring deserves the credit for obtaining the grant.

“Peter was driving to work one day listening to NPR when he heard that KCP&L was accepting applications for its micro grant program, which focuses on sustainability. So being the self-starter that he is, he literally just went online and immediately completed the grant request. KCP&L called us and told us we are the first and focused initiative for the micro grant program. It was amazing,” Kaplan said.

The KCP&L grant was \$2,460 and paid for a majority of the solar panels installed on top of the Project Matar pavilion. The grant didn’t quite pay for the entire project, thus the garden had to dip into its funds that have been raised by dedicated volunteers. Co-chair Lehman said volunteers from Black and Veatch, including an engineer and electrician, have helped them with the solar panels.

Several of the sustainability projects have enabled the garden to rely less on the generosity of The Temple,

Congregation B'nai Jehudah, on whose land the garden sits. Over the years the Reform congregation has generously allowed the garden to tap into its water and electricity.

“The congregation’s generosity has allowed the garden to thrive,” remarked volunteer coordinator Gay Handler. Kaplan pointed out that before the Mitzvah Garden started its sustainability programs, “We had the world’s longest hose from the Temple building that allowed us to water.”

“We also had the world’s largest extension cord from the building to power our pumps.”

Water capture, the third phase of sustainability, allowed the garden to “cut the hose,” Kaplan explained.

“The new solar array allowed us to ‘cut the cord,’” he continued.

The panels will run the garden’s water pump for three hours. Then the sun charges it up to run again.

A few weeks ago, a storm knocked out B'nai Jehudah’s power and Kaplan said the garden offered to let the congregation tap into its solar power.

All three Mitzvah Garden chairs laughed at the thought because realistically power from the solar array was not enough to actually provide power for the B'nai Jehudah building.

“We could have powered a bathroom for a day, but it’s still the concept of look what we’re now able to do for self-sufficiency and sustainability,” Kaplan pointed out.

Unpredictable ‘Mother Nature’

According to the National Weather Service, this last May and June rank as the second wettest May and June on record. On top of that it rained 14 straight weekends beginning in March through the last weekend in June, coming at a time when volunteers can typically lend a hand in the garden. It rained a lot last year as well and because of that, the garden has not yet had to use its watering system much, but Lehman said it’s ready to use when needed.

“The rain has almost been a little too much because we haven’t been able to plant our corn until the first week of July,” said Lehrman, explaining that the garden has a section of sweet corn and a section of popcorn.

In addition the rain has made the garden muddy, “but we’re not complaining about it,” Lehman said.

It typically takes about 10,000 gallons of water to make the garden grow. An inch of rain typically becomes 1,000 gallons of irrigation water collected by the water system called Project Matar.

“This year and last year haven’t needed any extra water than what they have been able to collect. However in past years they have had to bring water in,” Lehrman said.

One thing thriving in the ½-acre vegetable garden — planned prepared and tilled by Chuck Luchen — is the tomatoes.

“For a lot of people the rain has negatively impacted their tomatoes, but because we planted our tomatoes through some black plastic, it has kept a lot of the rain water away from the base of the plant and that’s helped us. Our tomatoes are probably looking better than most people, unless they grow them indoors,” Lehman said.

The rain, he continued, is also helping the garden’s cucumbers, sweet potatoes and peppers.

“The kale has been great. We’ve totally harvested beets and onions already,” Lehrman said.

Through the harvest season, the Mitzvah Garden donates fresh produce to the following charities: Jewish Family Services, KC Kosher Meals on Wheels, SAFEHOME, Catholic Charities, Village Presbyterian Church, Grandview Assistance Program, Shawnee Community Services and the Blue Valley Multi-Service Center.

As of early July, the garden had donated 26 flats of kale, 20 flats of onions, 18 beets, six peppers and one cucumber.

The garden produces vegetables all summer and the last batch of sweet potatoes will not be harvested until after the first frost.

“In the height of summer when the tomatoes come in, we can harvest as much as 500 pounds of produce a weekend,” said Handler, noting that both cucumbers and tomatoes are heavy.

Last year the garden produced about 10,000 pounds of food. Lehman said he expects the garden will produce at least that much, if not more, this year.

In addition to vegetables, an 18-tree orchard of apple, pear and peach trees was added to the property two years ago along with an assortment of cherries and blackberries. If all goes well, the trees should begin bearing fruit next season.

Co-chair Sonnenschein said the garden’s bees, taken care of by beekeeper Aaron Pfeffer, will produce about 50 pounds of honey this year. While most of the trees are only 2 years old there is a 3-year-old apple tree at the front of the garden that is producing apples this year.

“So this is the first year for Rosh Hashanah we’ll have Mitzvah Garden apples and honey,” Sonnenschein said.

All volunteer crew

The Mitzvah Garden was founded with a mission to provide healthy food alternatives to those less fortunate in our community, and Mitzvah Garden KC has been powered by a cadre of local volunteers. There is no paid staff, all Mitzvah Garden workers, including the volunteer coordinator and the chairs, are volunteers.

Volunteers — both Jewish and non-Jewish — are in the garden every Sunday. During the eight weeks of summer camp at The J, Ma’asim Tovim campers come to the garden every Thursday. A variety of other groups come through during the spring and summer. This year the staff of Jewish Family Services has worked at the garden as well as employees of Commerce Bank. The bank plans to send another group of 25 people to the garden later this summer. Other groups who have spent time at the garden include members of J-LEAD, one of the garden’s largest funders, this summer’s group of Leadership Tomorrow interns and campers from B’nai Jehudah’s Machane Jehudah Camp.

Volunteer Coordinator Handler said they are always searching for volunteers.

“If we have 10 people on a weekend we’re good. If we have less than that, we’re hurting,” she said, noting that teens can earn community service hours at Mitzvah Garden.

Kaplan said it’s a great place for families to work together.

“There’s no better place for intergenerational programming than here,” Kaplan said.

It's a great place for Scout projects as well. Boy Scouts have built the path leading up to the Mitzvah Garden as well as a shed to store all the gardening tools.

Sonnenschein said volunteers often do a little food prep with the harvest to show groups that "food doesn't all come from Hen House."

Leadership Tomorrow intern Rachel Beren, the garden's summer intern, prepared kale smoothies for the interns to sample during their visit.

"It was cool to show off what I've been doing," Beren said.

Luchen said the garden is ever evolving and each year "we improve and change."

For more information on the garden or to volunteer, visit Mitzvah Garden KC at www.mitzvahgardenkc.com or contact Volunteer Coordinator Handler at grhandler@mindspring.com or 913-345-1118.