



Joco



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FEATURE STORY

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WHAT DOES THE COUNTY'S BUDGET MEAN TO YOU?

Mitzvah Garden delivers bounty of food, passion and joy

By JODY HANSON

When you stand in the parking lot of The Temple, Congregation B'nai Jehudah (just south of 119th street and Nall in Overland Park) and look up the hill, all you can see is a wood and wire archway with the “Mitzvah Garden KC” sign on it. It's not until you walk up the stone pathway to the top that you can view the bounty that has grown from the passion of three members of the Jewish community — a community garden that is self-sustaining and provides thousands of pounds of donated produce every year.

How the Mitzvah Garden sprouted

In 2000, Overland Park resident Ken Sonnenschein installed 10 raised beds on the grounds of Village Shalom, a retirement home just up the street from B'nai Jehudah, so residents could do some planting and harvesting. Sonnenschein is friends with B'nai Jehudah members Larry Lehman and Andrew Kaplan.

Over the years, as plans for a new sanctuary at B'nai Jehudah never materialized, the three friends eyed the available land with a vision for something bigger than what Sonnenschein created at Village Shalom — a garden cultivated by volunteers from the area's Jewish community, with the harvested produce going to the greater community as donations.

“In 2010, we were able to get the congregation to allot 10,000 square feet for a community garden,” Lehman said. “That grew to 15,000, and today we have grown into almost a half acre.”

What does your garden grow?

This spring, volunteers planted kale, beets and onions. Summer crops are peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, sweet potatoes and corn. Thanks to a grant and a partnership with the Giving Grove, The Mitzvah Garden's 18-tree orchard has pear, peach and apple trees. Three



beehives produce honey. A section of beds are reserved for the B'nai Jehudah preschool class to plant and tend.

Symbolism also plays a role in the Mitzvah Garden. Jewish tradition refers to the “Seven Species” — two grains and five fruits — known as special products of the Land of Israel. They are wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates. Some grow in the ground and some grow in pots, but all can be found in the garden.

A special tree and the special volunteer who planted it

A peach tree in the middle of the orchard stands out from the rest. In front of it are three painted tiles on posts displaying names that might sound familiar — William, Reat and Terri. A volunteer

named Joe Karbank donated the tree and planted it on April 13, 2014, just

hours before the shootings outside the Jewish Community Center and Village Shalom that took the lives of Dr. William Corporon, Reat Underwood and Terri LaManno.

“I love the satisfaction of seeing things grow”

Karbank volunteers once or twice a week at The Mitzvah Garden. He studied agriculture and tree grafting in school. It should also be mentioned that Karbank is 81 years old.

“I love the satisfaction of seeing things grow,” Karbank said. “It’s a natural desire in human beings.”

Off the grid

David Ruppel, another volunteer with an engineering background, led the charge towards an important step to the garden being self-reliant — creating an irrigation system that didn’t rely on city water. With grants from several organizations and benefactors (including a \$1,000 grant from Johnson County Stormwater Management) volunteers built a rainwater collecting structure that creates water runoff. Every inch of rain collected equates to 900 gallons, and the water system’s holding tanks can hold 6,000 gallons of rainwater at a time. A pump moves the water — 100,000 gallons are needed on average each year — to a drip irrigation system throughout the garden.

The power to operate the pump used to come from an electrical cord that ran to B’nai Jehudah’s building. Today, that power comes from four solar panels installed on the roof of the rainwater collecting structure. Funding for those panels came from a KCP&L grant, with assistance from Black & Veatch.



Giving back to the community

While one goal of the Mitzvah Garden is to be “off the grid,” its mission is to feed those who can’t feed themselves. Nearly 10,000 pounds of produce are harvested and donated to various organizations, including Jewish Family Services Food Pantry, Grandview Assistance Program, Village Presbyterian Church food pantry, Shawnee Community Services and the Blue Valley Multi-Service Center.

The Grandview Assistance Program (GAP) receives enough produce each month from The Mitzvah Garden to provide fresh fruits and vegetables to 60 families. GAP Executive Director Sharon Kinder said their organization is so grateful for their partnership that’s now in its third year.

“GAP doesn’t have the funding nor the space to run our own community garden, so

our partnership with The Mitzvah Garden is vital and one of the only ways we can provide fresh produce to our clients,” Kinder said. “They even deliver the produce to us so we don’t have to send a volunteer to get it. It is such a blessing.”

Join the gardening community

The Mitzvah Garden is always looking for volunteers and the best way to learn more is by visiting their Facebook page (www.facebook.com/mitzvahgardenKC). According to Lehman, volunteers will experience more than dirt under their fingers and sore backs.

“I remember a few years ago watching a volunteer dig up a sweet potato,” recalls Lehman. “Once she had it in her hands she danced and laughed. She literally could not contain her joy at seeing this sweet potato come from the earth.” 🌞



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