

Cultivating for the community

THE COVENTRY COMMUNITY GARDEN IS IN THE RUNNING FOR A NATIONAL AWARD, THANKS TO ITS GENEROSITY TOWARDS TOWN

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COVENTRY — Earlier this month, the Coventry Community Garden received word from Organic Magazine that it was one of fifteen gardens nationwide nominated for a \$4,000 grant.

The grant program, through DeLoach Vineyards, will present checks to five community gardens who “have the most impact on their communities,” according to Robert Robillard, the Coventry Social Worker Supervisor. The other 14 nominees branch out as far as Wisconsin, New Mexico, California and other states; as well as one in Toronto, Ontario.

“They are looking for... the best [gardens] who grow produce for people in need,” explained Robillard. “Everything that we grow goes directly to the local food bank, which services about 500 people a month.”

The grant program will extend a five-month voting period for communities to support their local gardens, from March 6 to August 6. DeLoach Vineyards asks voters to pass on the contest to friends and family and vote for the “garden you feel will benefit most from winning an award.”

This is the first year that Coventry has applied for the grant, according to Robillard. If awarded the money, they plan to build a new shed.

The Coventry Community Garden was established three years ago, with this winter being the first that it attempt-

ed to do some winter growing. Robillard explained that gardeners purchased floating row covers, which is essentially a hoop covered with cloth material, to give the plants an extra six degrees leeway.

“It stops frost from landing on the plants for about an extra month,” he said.

The garden was “put to bed” in November but a few additional plants, such as root vegetables, Swiss chard and

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spinach, continued to grow until early December.

“It wasn’t substantial,” said Robillard of the extended season, but added that this was the first year and they “definitely plan to purchase” more covers next season.

Last year, the garden produced about 1,000 pounds of produce, all of which was donated to the Coventry Food Bank. Since it began, it has produced roughly 1.5 tons of produce, according to Robillard.

Everything grown in the garden is organic. A variety of vegetables, such as peppers, tomatoes, eggplants, cucumbers and more is planted. The garden also has two apple trees and one peach tree. According to Robillard, the garden also recently purchased two more apple trees.

“[We] get the dwarf size so that kids can pick from them,” he said of the apple trees. “They’re small but they bear a good amount of fruit.”

He stated that the community garden is a “teaching garden” and as a result, often works together with the elementary schools, a transition group at the high school and some of the Girl Scout troops. And when February comes, gardeners begin

utilizing the greenhouse at Alan Shawn Feinstein Middle School.

“February is usually when we start getting things rolling, even though they don’t get planted until June,” he said.

Just last week, Robillard explained, volunteers gathered at the middle school to begin cleaning in preparation for greenhouse growing. Next Wednesday, members of the Coventry Senior Center will come together to “start seeds,” he said.

“They are very, very helpful to start the plants and get them over to the greenhouse,” said Robillard of the work at the senior center.

He explained that “seed starting” is a technique that plants seeds in paper cups made of newspaper. Four seeds are placed in each cup. They are watered and placed in zip-close bags, which mimic the environment of a greenhouse. The seniors will take the seeds home and if they produce two leaves and reach a certain height, will bring them to the greenhouse at the middle school.

The technique helps the garden prepare for summer, especially with the plants that take longer to germinate: tomatoes, eggplants and peppers. When it comes time to open the outdoor garden in June, they can transport the plants in their newspaper cups right into the ground since the material is biodegradable, according to Robillard.

The Coventry Community Garden is manned by approximately 50 volunteers in the community. It is located outside of the Coventry Town Hall Annex, 1675 Flat River Road.

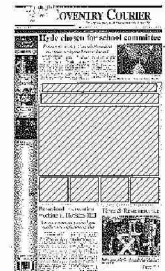




Photo: Lauren Knight

The Coventry Community Garden, shown before it was put to bed in November, has generated over a ton of produce in its life.



A volunteer waters the Coventry Community Garden during last year's growing season. The garden is one of a handful nationally vying for a \$4,000 grant, awarded to the one that has done the most to help its community, which the garden in Coventry does by giving produce to the Coventry Food Bank.

Submitted Photo