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Orem church grows vegetables for local poor

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Orem • A formerly vacant lot next to Orem Community Church is now helping Utah County's poor put fresh produce on their dinner tables.

Church members have turned part of the lot into a community garden, planting corn, potatoes, peppers, tomatoes, squash and other produce. The harvested goods will go to Community Action Service's food bank in Provo, which assists low-income Utahns.

Along with helping the poor, the garden has become a rallying point for the small Protestant congregation and has brought the community together.

"On any given Sunday, you can see parishioners come up with their trucks and are out hoeing the garden in their Sunday best," said Sherry Pendergrass, the church's secretary.

Don Pendergrass, a member of the church's board and Sherry Pendergrass' father, said the garden was initiated by Tino Olivera, a recently naturalized citizen living in an apartment in the church's parsonage. Don Pendergrass said Olivera, a Mexican native, asked if he could start a garden in a weed-choked lot behind the parsonage.

The church leaders agreed, but clearing a 36-by-110-foot swath of ground — including digging out old fence posts set in concrete — appeared to be a daunting task.

That's when James Siebach, a philosophy professor at Brigham Young University, stepped in. Siebach brought over his own tractor, which made short work of the field, and created furrows for the plants. The plowing revealed deep, rock-free topsoil, ideal for cultivation.

"He came to our church [after plowing the field], and the congregation applauded him," Don Pendergrass recalled.

Then Olivero and the church members had to deal with the problem that has plagued gardeners since the pioneer days: How to water plants in a desert clime. Don Pendergrass said the first attempt at flood irrigation, using city culinary water, was a miserable failure. The water seeped into the ground before it got to the end of the garden row.

There was an irrigation canal running along the back of the property, but the Provo Bench Irrigation Company, which owned the canal, initially denied the church permission to use the water. The problem? The field was too high above the canal, and the company didn't allow pumps.



Courtesy of Sherry Pendergrass Tino Olivera and Don Pendergrass in the garden at at orem community church, 130 North 400 East in Orem.

But Don Pendergrass said Randy Chapman, who works for the canal company, learned that the church was going to donate the crops to the food bank, and secured an exception to the pump rule. The canal company also allows the church to pull the water from the main canal instead of having to wait for a turn on the smaller canal that runs near the garden.

Sherry Pendergrass said the garden wasn't the only thing Olivera was working on. He was also gaining his U.S. citizenship, with the help and encouragement of church members.

Don Pendergrass said Olivera came to the country illegally, and worked jobs in San Diego before coming to Utah and helping with the garden between his two regular jobs. He said Olivera was able to take his citizenship oath in a July 2 ceremony at SCERA Park as part of America's Freedom Festival in Provo.

Sherry Pendergrass said the goal next year is to expand the garden and produce more food for the food bank.

In earlier interviews, Myla Dutton, Community Action's executive director, said fresh produce is always welcome at the food pantry. She said it is a welcome complement to the canned and processed food the group usually receives from food drives.

Community Action encourages people to plant extra rows of produce to donate to the food bank. It also receives produce from the Utah County Jail's garden, which is tended by inmates.

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