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September 07, 2009 8:56 AM

Santa Ana community garden gains popularity

By THERESA CISNEROS
The Orange County Register

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SANTA ANA A community garden created a year ago to bring a bit of nature to a high-density area is gaining popularity, as more residents are discovering tranquility and an increased appreciation for the ecosystem among its raised flower beds and seedlings.

Last spring, The Grain Project - a nonprofit group aimed at promoting healthy communities - claimed a quarter-acre patch in Jerome Park for the Jerome Park CommUnity Garden, a co-op where residents can harvest low-cost fruits and veggies while nurturing their green thumbs.



Malachi Deshpande, 5, takes a bite from a carrot that he harvested at the Jerome Park Community Garden.

THERESA CISNEROS, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

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Jerome Park CommUnity Garden

Address: 2115 W. McFadden Ave., Santa Ana

Hours: Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m.

Information: 714-953-5513 or 714-542-9392

About 100 locals now belong to the gardening club, and dozens turn out each Saturday to till soil and to plant and harvest seasonal crops. Starting in early May, organizers will also open the garden's chain-link gate on Sunday afternoons.

The garden sits in the southeast corner of the park, directly across the drainage channel from a string of high-density apartment complexes on Townsend Street.

It's peppered with flower beds, California native plants and hand-painted signs with cheerful slogans. There's also an overgrown swath of grass in one corner that's used to show kids how soil can be tilled and reused.

"We feel (that an) understanding of the relationship between the land and food is important to appreciate the full scope of what's involved in successfully producing food," said Nick Spain, director of The Grain Project.

Gardeners partake in ground prep, tilling, planting, tending, watering and harvesting. Most live within two miles of the park, said Spain, with the most active contingency coming from nearby apartments.

Participants say they're drawn to the grounds for various reasons.

Mario Oduno brings his children to the garden weekly because it gets them away from the TV and instills in them a respect for nature, he said.

Nayelly Galeana, 11, visits the garden because

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she can plant crops and watch them grow, which is something there's no room for in her apartment complex.

And those who come from more agrarian communities say the garden fulfills their deep-rooted desire to be close to the earth.

"It's nice to get back into the dirt," said Bella Young, a Laguna Woods resident who is originally from El Salvador. "Gardening is like therapy for me."

In the future, organizers hope to attract more gardeners, increase educational instruction and establish formal ties with local schools, Spain said. They also hope to start a new spinoff project through which The Grain Project would help residents establish organic gardens in their own backyards.

"Santa Ana is a great community in the interior of Orange County with an ethnically and socioeconomically diverse population," Spain said. "It's just an ideal place to initiate projects of this kind."

Information: 714-542-9392 or <http://www.grainproject.org/>.

Contact the writer: tcisneros@ocregister.com or 714-704-3707

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