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Cindy Steinbeck-Newkirk picks a pepper at the Vineyards Growing Veggies™ plot at Steinbeck Vineyards and Winery

Generous Earth, *Generous Hearts*

A local winery joins with an international organization to fight hunger one acre at a time

ASHLEY SELF

At the end of a nondescript dirt driveway east of Paso Robles sits a well-tended, one-acre vegetable garden. It is full of tomatoes, squash, asparagus, melons, peppers, and basil, bordered by lavender, and surrounded by the lush, green vineyards of Steinbeck Vineyard & Winery. It is thriving in perfect rows, fresh-faced alongside the modest original Steinbeck home and its half-century-old outbuildings. However, this is not your average family garden. To the people tending this plot, it

is a garden of opportunity and they are master gardeners. ¶ The garden is the first in a pilot program called Vineyards Growing Veggies™, and is an extension of Urban Farming's "Include Food™" program. Established in Detroit, Michigan in 2005 with a mission to end hunger in our generation, Urban Farming is now an international organization, with gardens growing from Jamaica to England. ▶▶

Steinbeck Vineyards & Winery is the first vineyard anywhere to participate, donating one acre (nestled among thousands of acres of vines) that will generate approximately six to seven tons of fresh local produce annually—all of which will be distributed to individuals and families in need. In San Luis Obispo County, there are an estimated 35,000 people who are considered “food insecure”—meaning they live their daily lives in fear of hunger or starvation. That is 15 percent of the population, and the national average. Carl Hansen of the Paso Robles chapter of the Food Bank Coalition of San Luis Obispo County estimates that two or three of these one-acre gardens could serve the entire population of “food insecure” residents in this county.

The intention of the pilot program is to use this model to expand the Vineyards Growing Veggies™ initiative worldwide, planting and harvesting small plots of fallow vineyard land using donated resources and volunteer labor. It is impossible not to liken the scenario to the organic lifecycle of a garden: a seed is planted, it bears fruit, from that fruit seeds are collected and distributed, and the cycle begins again in another garden.

The seed was planted last summer at the final competition of the Winery Music Awards at River Oaks Hot Springs and Spa.

To the creative and passionate individuals behind Vineyards Growing Veggies,™ this garden will literally feed the hungry, and literally and metaphorically bring people back to earth, back to the soil that sustains them, and give them a reason to appreciate it intrinsically

Kathy Kelly (founder and producer of the Winery Music Awards) was introduced to Taja Sevelle (founder of Urban Farming) when the two collaborated on how they could work together. That collaboration resulted in two initiatives: the Vineyards Growing Veggies™ Pilot Program, and Cal Poly’s involvement with Urban Farming’s “Food Chain™” edible wall project in Los Angeles. While Urban Farming is focused on growing produce in low-income, inner-city neighborhoods, it seemed natural, given the surroundings, to expand into a rural setting and make use of the rich, fertile resources for which the Central Coast is known. From there, Kelly approached Cindy Steinbeck-Newkirk, director of marketing for Steinbeck Vineyards & Winery, and she readily agreed to participate.

The program evolved to include Melanie Blankenship (owner of Nature’s Touch Nursery in Templeton) as “Master Gardener.” Amy White of Backyard Harvest for distribution; and Carl Hansen. The irrigation system, seeds and seedlings, compost, tools, and labor were generously donated by Farm Supply Company, Greenheart Farms, Botanical Interests Seed Packets, Hometown Nursery, Home Depot, Green Acres Lavender Farm, Community Recycling, Premier Ag, and Trader Joe’s. Local photographer Richard Baker donated his services to document the project.

To the creative and passionate individuals behind Vineyards Growing Veggies,™ this garden will literally feed the hungry, and literally and metaphorically bring people back to earth, back to the soil that sustains them, and give them a reason to appreciate it intrinsically—the unmistakable taste of a ripe tomato just off the vine. White grew up in the area and gets her green thumb handed down from many generations of home gardeners. Both Steinbeck-Newkirk and Blankenship are daughters of farmers—Steinbeck-Newkirk’s farming roots go back six generations in Paso Robles, and Blankenship grandparents were migrant farmers at a time when the land that is now the Paso Robles Fairgrounds was a family farm. They speak with the confidence of women who could feed their families through hunting and farming if the need arose. For them, this program is also an opportunity to impart some of that wisdom with the hopes that the art of living sustainably is not lost.

Kelly also grew up in a rural setting in a small East Coast town about the size of Templeton. She ran through acres of cornfields and even grew her own vegetable garden every summer. After 30 years of living in concrete jungles from Atlanta to L.A., getting back to the earth has given her a renewed appreciation for the area. With 29,000 acres of vineyards in the county, and 35,000 hungry

people, she saw the need and the ability to fill it. It is her hope that the pilot program will run seamlessly, making it easier for other vineyards to say “yes.” It seems to be going that way. The garden was planted on May 31 with volunteer labor. As of early September, over 2,760 pounds of fresh, locally-grown veggies have been harvested and given to the Food Bank for families in need all around the county.

During WWII, Americans planted 20 million victory gardens producing millions of tons of produce so that commercially farmed goods could be saved for our troops. At the hands of an experienced gardener, a patch of dirt, a handful of seeds, water, and sun can change people’s lives. Vineyards Growing Veggies™ plans on proving that—one vineyard and one acre at a time. [CCM](#)

For more information about Vineyards Growing Veggies,™ please contact Kathy Kelly at (805) 434-5100 or (310) 717-8750. To find out more about those involved in the program, please see the following:

Urban Farming:
www.urbanfarming.org

Steinbeck Winery & Vineyards:
<http://steinbeckwines.com/>



Cindy Steinbeck-Newkirk



Kathy Kelly helped sew the seeds for the Vineyards Growing Veggies™ program at Steinbeck Vineyards and Winery

