



Volunteers gathered to grow not grapes but vegetables at Steinbeck Vineyards in Paso Robles on May 31. The crops will be donated to local foodbanks and nonprofits.

Vineyard grows veggies

SLO winery produces crops for the hungry

BY EMILY RANCER
Staff Writer

Before the morning fog had even untangled itself from the rows of grapevines in Paso Robles, nearly two dozen volunteers dug through dirt and punched holes through slow-drip irrigation hoses.

Mostly locals, the volunteers sifted and seeded their way through nearly

an acre of land Saturday, May 31, for one purpose: to end hunger in San Luis Obispo County.

Vineyards Growing Veggies – the program that brought all the volunteers together – is the first of its kind in the United States. With “extreme amounts of land” across Paso Robles’ vineyards, program director Kathy Kelly – also the founder and producer of Paso Robles’ Winery Music Awards – said the area

naturally lends itself to growing crops for low-income individuals.

“Obviously, vineyards already have watering systems in place. They have the gardening tools and the big tractors that the churches or schoolyards don’t have,” Kelly said. “So this brings it up to a larger farming level. We’ll be able to grow more food and give it to more

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Urban Farming program development director Joyce Lapinsky and Kelly formulated the idea last year. Kelly then brought up the concept of vineyards growing vegetables with Cindy Newkirk, co-owner of Steinbeck Vineyards, and the concept took off.

“I’m thinking, well, I have an acre of land right by my house ... but it’s really not conducive to putting a vineyard there,” Newkirk said. “And when [Kelly] mentioned this, there is water available right there, I already grow a garden, my family and hospitality go hand in hand ... we would be a perfect fit for this.”

Steinbeck harvests about 2,000 grapes

annually from 500 acres of land, and sells 99 percent of its grapes to 10 area wineries, including J. Lohr and Eberle.

It keeps the other 1 percent to make about 1,000 cases of its own Steinbeck Vineyards and Winery wine, which it just began selling for the first time last month.

Once word spread about the Vineyards Growing Veggies program, donations quickly began pouring in from all over the country.

Botanical Interests in Colorado donated thousands of seeds, as did Greenheart Farms in Arroyo Grande; Green Acres Lavender Farm in Atascadero donated many lavender seedlings; and Community Recycling donated 25 tons of compost.

To care for the growing crops and to distribute everything to low-income individuals over time, Backyard Harvest’s

Paso Robles chapter and the SLO Food Coalition have teamed up with the pilot program, an offshoot of Urban Farming. Crops now in the ground include squash, peppers, eggplant, melons, tomatoes, carrots, radishes, onions, corn and marjoram.

“The price of everything has gone up and people won’t be able to afford fresh produce,” said volunteer Kate Davis as she took a break from planting peppers. “Being out here helping is giving back.”

All the crops will be grown using sustainable methods, which coincides with how Steinbeck Vineyards grows its own grapes.

“My family has been farming this land since 1923, and we have been in Paso Robles as farmers since 1884,” Newkirk said. “We’re always growing food for ourselves – homemade applesauce, homemade bread – things that are part of

our lives. And even sustainable farming has been a part of our lives for six generations and what we’re realizing is we just need to talk about it.”

Before Vineyards Growing Veggies starts signing up other vineyards for the program’s next phase, Kelly and Lapinsky want to hammer out all the logistical details.

“This is the pilot program so we’re going to work out the model for vineyards and once we get that model set, we’ll expand to other vineyards,” Kelly said.

Kelly also has convinced California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo, to get involved with Urban Farming’s Food Chain program.

Two classes in the agriculture department are germinating 4,000 seedlings that will be planted vertically on the walls of a low-income area of Los Angeles later this year.

EMILY RANCER PHOTO

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Written by Emily Rancer

Friday, 06 June 2008



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