

Helping hands across generations

Piedmont students, Grand Lake Gardens residents create organic garden

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The enthusiasm of dozens of high school students working to help the hungry and the environment can create a community garden from scratch in a just couple of days. But keeping it flourishing will take a concerted commitment.



Piedmont High student Anna Schiller, right, saws through wood that will be used for planter boxes in the new community garden at the Grand Lake Gardens retirement complex. Joining her for last Saturday's workday at the garden were fellow students, from left, Nick Balkissoon and Andrew Dodds. Frank Silver, a Piedmont contractor, was one of several parent guides for the Rebuilding Together Oakland event.

"I enjoy helping people improve their lives," said Jenny Thompson, a Piedmont High student who served as volunteer coordinator for last weekend's first workday at the new Grand Lake Gardens' community garden. "We are going to continue helping them plant here and maintain it so it stays looking good."

Members of the Piedmont Community Service Crew from the coed Piedmont Boy Scouts' Venturing Crew worked with residents of the Santa Clara Avenue retirement facility all day to build redwood planter boxes, clear brush and lay sod.

A bucket brigade of teens wearing tie-dye T-shirts hauled dirt from a pile in the street up several flights of stairs to a large unused plot that will be transformed into an organic garden. The vegetables will be donated to the Alameda Food Bank.

Affiliated with Rebuilding Together Oakland, the project was sponsored by a number of local residents and community service organizations. There is another workday in the garden this Saturday, but organizers say they already have enough help. However, they will need volunteers in the weeks and months ahead to maintain the garden.

Ken Li, a leader of the Piedmont Boy Scouts, said working on Rebuilding Together Oakland projects, such as an East Oakland home renovation that teens completed in October, teaches students the value of community service. "The kids feel the empowerment that they are doing something more relevant than usual," he said.

Piedmont contractor Frank Silver got involved with Rebuilding Together Oakland projects when his daughter Madison joined the crew. He helped design the 8-by-3-foot redwood boxes that the young volunteers assembled and offered guidance on using an electric saw.

"It's nice to work with high scholars and teach them about building stuff," Silver said.

Grand Lake Gardens residents Doris and Joe Pummill, who are 80 and 83, respectively, came up with the idea of creating the garden as a way to reduce global warming. With the help of the facility's staff, they envisioned building a big garden and donating its harvest to the food bank, which tends to receive a lot of processed food instead of fresh veggies.

Watching their plan come to fruition with the help of dozens of teens was thrilling, they said.

"It's so exciting to see young people out and working and being involved — together we have really made a huge difference," said Doris Pummill, who along with her husband heads up the complex's Greening Committee. "We see success as producing food for people who need it."

Resident Joan Veldhuizen, also 80, said she isn't sure many of the complex's 90 residents will actually participate in gardening, but the project will certainly leave them with something beautiful to look at, rather than the empty plot she dubbed "the desert."

"When their redwood planters are producing," she said, "it's going to be a great show."

Contact jambrow@gmail.com.

HOW TO HELP

WHAT: Grand Lake Gardens Community Garden

WHERE: 401 Santa Clara St., Oakland

TO VOLUNTEER: Contact Carole Lee at 510-419-0560 or carolehenrylee@juno.com. For information about the Piedmont Community Service Crew, call the Piedmont Boy Scouts office at 547-4493 or go to www.piedmontbsa.org.

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