



Father Robert Leising tends the garden at St. John the Baptist Catholic Church.-Photo by Toni Ross

## Harvest from these gardens helps others

By Toni Ross

Wednesday, July 30, 2014 3:40pm | NEWS LOCAL NEWS

From swapping plant starts in the springtime to sharing ripe produce in the fall, gardens inspire an attitude of giving. This spring, Homer's St. John the Baptist Catholic Church joined a growing local trend of gardening for those in need.

Father Robert Leising is one of three priests who serve the lower Kenai Peninsula. Although he lives in Soldotna, he drives to Homer on Tuesdays to serve the parish on weeknights.

Leising grew up in a small town in New York, between Buffalo and Niagara Falls, and his dad always had a vegetable garden. Now, at each parish he serves, Leising tries to put in a garden as well.

“It’s may be a little part of my spirituality,” he said. “Every church I try to find a spot where I can drop in a little piece of God’s creation.”

So this spring Leising mowed a patch of ground in the lot full of fireweed across from the church. Twice. Then the Traugott family brought their John Deere tractor and cultivator to turn the soil. When they hit a boulder and broke the cultivator, Tom Pruitt brought his Troy-Bilt rototiller to finish the job.

Now, Leising said they use hoes — and that part won’t stop until harvest. A good 20 hours of work each week goes into the 40-by-60-foot garden. The crop includes 250 potato plants and roughly 100 each of broccoli, Swiss chard, lettuce, cabbage, radishes, carrots and turnips.

“The Parish Community Garden,” as it is called, was allotted \$500 from the church, but so far has cost about half that. Everything has been donated except for the fence posts, weed barrier and some potato seedlings.

At harvest time Leising expects the garden to produce food for about 30 families — those who are in need within the parish, and the rest for the Homer Community Food Pantry.

Leising said the lettuce was looking good until he saw five crows in it one evening.

“And they got it all trimmed down very nicely,” he said with a chuckle, adding that it’s part of a 50/50 philosophy he has: 50 percent of the garden for the people and 50 percent for the animals — although he was told that moose don’t know what 50 is.

Recycled fishing net from the Kachemak Gear Shed, Redden Marine Supply, now protects everything but the potatoes.

St. Augustine’s Episcopal Church is now in its fifth year of gardening for the food pantry. Catherine Knott, who volunteers in the garden, said it was the vestry’s idea to start the garden, and that it was something that appealed to everybody.

With 21 raised beds, most of them 4-by-8 feet, Knott said the biggest challenge is keeping a core group of four or five volunteers throughout the summer. Lead volunteer and coordinator Deborah Townsend keeps a list of chores in a box outside the church and community members are invited to stop by any time and choose a task.

Recently, about 10 volunteers spent a Saturday working in the garden. They were coordinated through AHA, Alaskans Helping Alaskans, as part of a Time Bank project. The idea is to bank volunteer hours doing a task and then withdraw them for another task, like swapping gardening hours for music lessons or woodcutting.

The garden, which is named after the late Julie Cesarini, is planted with kale, chard, broccoli, lettuce and potatoes. Knott said that Cesarini, a former member of the church, was well known in Homer.

“She was wonderful about looking after people,” Knott said. “She really had that value for compassion for those in need.”

In 2012, the memorial garden was one of 22 projects on the lower peninsula to receive a People’s Garden micro-grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture. The Homer United Methodist Church also received a People’s Garden grant.

Karin Sonnen, who is a member of the Methodist Church, said the idea for the garden wasn’t really hers.

“God gives us nudges, and we can act on them, or not,” she said. “This is one of those nudges God was giving me, but it took a few years before I acted on it — thankfully, God knows me well and is patient.”

When Sonnen learned of the grant, which was distributed through the Homer Soil and Water Conservation District, she met with former pastor, Charles Martindell. The church formed a committee to apply for the grant, which they used to purchase a moose and rabbit fence, as well as establish the garden.

The “Martindell People’s Garden” is now in its third year. Kale, broccoli, sugar snap peas and potatoes fill the 24-by-32 foot plot, which produces more than 500 pounds of food each year.

Tended primarily by 10 to 12 children from the church, Sonnen said she gets it ready for planting, but the kids plant the seeds, starts and potatoes.

“They love the planting, and love to water and absolutely love the harvest,” she said. “They are learning so much about gardening and how the produce they eat grows — one child was amazed that you put one potato into the ground and it grows lots of them — as well as how to serve and be a blessing to others.”

Baycrest Greenhouse has grown and donated all of the starts for the garden, said Sonnen.

“We custom order them,” she said. “It’s just so fantastic.”

Tracy Asselin, owner of Baycrest Greenhouse, doesn’t just donate vegetable starts to the food pantry effort. Along with fellow gardener, Jeanne McArthur, she tends a food pantry garden at the Baycrest lookout.

While working in a flowerbed for the garden club, Asselin said she noticed a neighboring bed without anything in it. Now, for eight years she and McArthur have filled that empty spot with vegetables, herbs, rhubarb and a gooseberry bush. In addition to providing food for the pantry, Asselin said the garden shows visitors to Homer what sorts of things are grown here.

Diana Jeska, director of the food pantry, said they serve between 65-130 families every week, and that having fresh vegetables to put in food boxes for those families is “just awesome.” In addition to the larger garden donations there are individuals who bring in random cucumbers, tomatoes and squash. Vendors and visitors at the Homer Farmers Market also donate to the food pantry by filling a tub set by the stage on Saturdays.

“I can’t express how wonderful this community is to the people who need it,” said Jeska.

*Toni Ross is a freelance writer who lives in Homer.*