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City Hall Campus to Feature Community Garden

Perris officials are developing a community garden on the City Hall Campus and are partnering with other agencies to bring locally grown fruits and vegetables to families, community schools, churches and neighborhoods.

Isabel Carlos, assistant director of Administrative Services in Perris, said the City is working with Eastern Municipal Water District and the Riverside County Department of Public Health to bring the concept to reality.

Carlos unveiled the plan at the Sept. 9 Perris City Council meeting, where it received rousing support from Mayor Daryl Busch and other elected officials.

Carlos said the “demonstration center” community garden is expected to produce a harvest by April. The demo garden will take root on a small plot of land at the north end of the City Hall Campus.

“We’re hoping that it can be replicated and expanded throughout the City,” she said.

The City is exploring a variety of methods to maximize yields of fruits and vegetables. Among the options:

- Box gardens to grow peppers, watermelon, zucchini, cilantro, strawberries, lemon, radish and other fruits and vegetables in compact spaces. Box gardens keep weeds away, reduce soil impaction, provide good drainage and barriers to slugs and snails.
- Raised planter boxes, ideal for growing tomatoes, peppers, strawberries, radishes, snow peas, cabbage and garlic. Other benefits from this type of gardening include harvests that are easy to plant and tend, easy gardening, no soil impaction, good drainage and resistant to slugs and snails.
- Hydroponic gardens (growing plants in mineral nutrients and water without soil) for lettuce, spinach, cucumbers, kale, mustard greens, watercress and arugula. Plants in hydroponic gardens grow at a faster rate, consume less water and display fewer problems with infestations and disease than those grown in traditional gardens.
- Garden towers to grow beans, cucumbers, squash, melons, mint, parsley and herbs. Plants grown in these vertical environments grow faster, use less water and can be rotated for optimum exposure to the sun. As many as 50 plants can be grown in a space as small as 2-feet by 2-feet.
- Aeroponic vertical tower gardens (growing plants in nutrients in small places like rooftops, patios and balconies) for mustard, lettuce, bok choy, lemons and basil. Crops raised in this environment grow 50 percent faster, use no soil, 90 percent less water and 90 percent less land.

Members of the Perris City Council enthusiastically threw their support behind the community garden program.

“I can’t wait to see how fast we can expand this to schools and neighborhoods,” said Mayor Daryl Busch. “Maybe we can get it up and running before April. It sure looks like a winner.”

City officials were pleased to know that the community garden initiative—known officially as the Perris Green City Farm Program—piggybacks on the existing Chef-in-the-Classroom effort.

That program features lessons conducted by a chef and City representatives who instruct elementary school children and their parents about making healthy food choices and the benefits of exercise. It is part of the City’s ongoing Live Well Perris healthy-eating active-living program.

Mayor Pro-Tem Tonya Burke said the community-garden concept grew out of the City’s strategic planning process. She said that like other aspects of the Live Well initiative, the community garden will increase engagement between Perris residents, municipal staff, local school districts and elected representatives.

“People are taking the Live Well campaign to heart,” Burke said. “I see more people walking and riding bicycles and asking for more walking and riding paths. I think people will jump at the chance to grow their own gardens and I see other cities following our example. Once again, Perris is leading the pack—and that makes me feel very pleased.”

City Councilwoman Rita Rogers agreed residents will embrace the community garden concept as they have other aspects of the Live Well Perris campaign.

“I can’t wait to see it come to fruition,” Rogers said. “The City of Perris always seems to take the lead with innovative programs. It’s in tune with our Live Well program and will provide a complete example of what healthy eating is all about. It allows people with only small side yards or backyards to grow healthy food choices. It will be a wonderful example for our community.”

Councilman David Starr Rabb said the community-garden initiative demonstrates the power of partnerships.

“I’m excited about the possibilities for our community by working with EMWD and the Riverside County Department of Public Health,” Rabb said. “The synergy among the different partners is really, really good.”

Rabb said he hopes the community garden-project emphasizes the importance of avoiding pesticides and genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and produces tasty, nutritious and organically grown crops. Representatives from EMWD and Riverside County were equally enthusiastic about the Perris initiative.

“It’s an honor for EMWD to partner with the City and county,” said Ron Sullivan, a member of the agency’s board of directors. “The garden will produce a nice green area, a learning center and something everyone will be proud of.”

Gayle Hoxter, head of nutrition services for the Riverside County Department of Public Health, said the community garden continues the City’s commitment to spur healthy-eating choices through education and example.

“It is great that city leaders in Perris recognize the importance of establishing a community garden to help the community eat better and provide healthier alternatives to processed foods,” she said. “It is just another example of the collaborative effort needed to improve health for all the community.”

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