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A Rare Kind of Food Bank, and Just Maybe the Hippest, Flourishes

By PATRICIA LEIGH BROWN

For most gardeners, spending a gorgeous Saturday morning harvesting basil and organic heirloom tomatoes is a life-enhancing experience. But for green thumbs at one particular garden -- an innovative addition to a food bank for people with H.I.V. and AIDS -- the life-embracing quality of a bountiful harvest is quite literal.

"I'm not a California effete kind of person; it's important to get the nutrition," said Andrew Eckers, a 51-year-old volunteer gardener with a fondness for sorrel and pea shoots who, when the disease had him fully in its grip, spent eight years in a wheelchair. "But this is also pleasurable."

Founded in 1999 to provide produce for people living with AIDS, the garden is part of what may well be the country's hippest food bank, a place where the Alice Waters grow-your-own organic food ethic supplants gloomy institutional staples like American cheese and day-old bread.

While most people find little appeal in the typical food bank, this one "creates a place of beauty," said Rachel Gardner, a retired chef from San Francisco who helps coordinate the volunteer work and gives nutrition and cooking classes for those the garden serves.

The garden, run by Food for Thought, a nonprofit organization, is overseen by horticulturalists from the nearby Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, and many of its volunteers are H.I.V. patients who benefit from it. It brims with green beans and scallions but also obscure varieties of amaranth, an ancient Andean grain with flowing Rapunzel-like purple stalks. The fresh produce harvested by the volunteers is the food bank's mainstay, though it also dispenses other groceries as well as vitamins.

The bank reflects not only Sonoma County's obsession with food and wine but also its lesser-known side: long a weekend and vacation destination for gays from San Francisco, about 70 miles south, the area along the Russian River absorbed a heavy exodus from the city in the 1980's, during the height of the AIDS epidemic.

Today, Sonoma is one of the country's few rural counties disproportionately affected by H.I.V. and AIDS, according to the county's Health Department. Ten percent of residents live below the poverty line, and the 450 or so people who come regularly to the food bank reflect the changing demographics of the disease: 60 are women, and 75 Latino.

Among those who are both is Suzanna R., 56, who asked that her full name not be used. "A lot of the Latina community is in hiding," she said, "even from our families."

Her arrival at the garden followed years of severe depression. Fifteen years ago, she said, her husband committed suicide, leaving a note explaining that he had AIDS and that she should be tested. "I was one angry -- whatever -- on wheels," she said. "I felt abused, unclean."

The garden helped to bring back her appetite, both for food and for life in general.

Despite medical gains, many people with H.I.V. and AIDS face metabolic changes and digestive trouble as side effects from medication. Mr. Eckers, for instance, recalled a period when "a muffin looked like a mountain."

At the time, he said, he was going to a typical food bank in San Francisco, where he encountered "government-issued spaghetti sauce, old and tasteless." Such food undermined his will to eat, depriving him of the nutrition he badly needed.

It also sent a distressing message, he said: "You're not worth much, somehow."

The Food for Thought organization receives some federal financing but raises most of its money privately. At a coming "Calabash" benefit, for instance, artists will transform huge gourds from the garden into elaborate sculptures, which will then be auctioned off. The group also gets donations from Lazy Bear Weekend, a yearly summer gathering that attracts thousands of gay visitors.

The food bank, which has an exuberant bower of pink Mme. Alfred Carrière roses at the entrance, serves as horticultural therapy for the volunteers, who prune, snip and add wiggly red worms to vegetable compost. It is also part of a broader move to bring organic food and a bit of the wild into places where it has been lacking, among them schools and prisons.

"It's important that people not just be passive recipients of care, to be conscious of what they put in their bodies," said Allen Nishikawa, an analyst for the county Health Department. "It's part of a bigger movement to get people to be more thoughtful about things as basic as eating."

If the place seems to resemble Chez Panisse, with edible flowers and tea harvested from lemon verbena and mint from the garden, that suits its regulars just fine. The act of harvesting pea shoots and sorrel -- or, on one recent day, 87 pounds of heirloom tomatoes -- provides far more than sustenance.

"You can't give away food without an emotional and spiritual component," said Stewart Scofield, a volunteer coordinator who discovered the garden after his partner died of AIDS. "We're friends and neighbors taking care of each other."