

HB Independent article on The Harvest Club

Natural Perspectives:
Harvest needs all the hands it can get

By Vic Leipzig and Lou Murray

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The Harvest Club of greater Huntington Beach is looking for more helpers, whether they are home growers, pickers, web masters or donors.

While Vic was learning more about the status of local cactus wrens Saturday, I stopped by the home of Evelyn Budwig, a volunteer at Shipley Nature Center. She had invited the Harvest Club to her home to pick Valencia oranges from her tree that day.

The Harvest Club is a small group of friends who harvest excess fruit or vegetables with the permission of the homeowners. They donate that produce to the needy in our community. Recipients of past harvests have included Someone Cares Soup Kitchen in Costa Mesa, Hope Office at St. Bonaventure, Huntington Beach Youth Shelter, Michael E. Rodgers Seniors' Center and the Salvation Army for their food distribution program in the Oak View neighborhood in Huntington Beach.

Their goals are simple. They want to bring neighbors together, provide healthy food for the hungry, promote sustainable use of urban resources and encourage home food production with minimal waste.

With a bit over a year of organization and practice under their belts, they want to grow their club. They're looking for people who have website talent, people with organizational and/or fundraising skills, and more tools for the club's use.

"We want to grow the capacity of the club to provide fresh food to food banks," said club founder Jeff Lebow.

They are also looking for more homeowners who have surplus fruit or vegetables. At present, they have 15 homeowners who are growing 25 different kinds of fruit on standard-sized trees. Lebow maintains a database of when that fruit is ripe and where it is. The harvest includes winter crops of navel and Valencia oranges, lemons, limes and avocados, plus summer crops of plums, apricots, peaches and nectarines, and fall crops of apples and persimmons.

"There are hungry people and there is a surplus of fruit in the community," Lebow said. "We need to get them together."

Lebow got the idea for the harvest club on a day in the fall of 2008 when he spent six hours harvesting Fuyu persimmons from his tree to donate to a charitable group. He thought that getting a group of people together would be fun and would make the harvest

go more quickly. He talked to his friend Lynda Hernandez, and the Harvest Club was born. They now have about 20 harvesters and are looking for more.

At Saturday's harvest, about a half-dozen people plucked and boxed oranges while surrounded by the rich, sweet smell of an orange tree. Naedja Maciel climbed high into the tree to get to the fruit, while Karen Riggs, Peggy Hooberman, Hernandez and Richard Keslerwest used fruit-picking tools. Richard's 9-year-old son Lee helped box the fruit.

One of the things that Lebow pointed out was that as fruit trees mature, so do the homeowners. Often a tree will be at prime productivity when a homeowner's ability to harvest the fruit is declining. Or maybe the tree just produces far more fruit than the homeowner can use. That's where the Harvest Club comes in. They will pick the fruit from the top of the tree, leaving the low-hanging fruit for the homeowner.

Homeowners get a tax credit for their donation. While the Harvest Club is not a 501(c)3 organization, it will bring or mail back a receipt to the homeowner from the charitable organization to which the fruit was donated.

One thing that Lebow is committed to is minimizing the distance between where the food is grown and where it is used. That reduces the carbon footprint of the food. They also want to encourage homeowners to grow more of their own fruits and vegetables. Longtime readers of this column know that this is one of Vic's and my goals as well. That is why we have 21 dwarf and semi-dwarf fruit trees in our yard, and three vegetable growing areas, plus three hens for eggs. We keep it local by growing as much of our own food as we possibly can.

Another thing that Lebow is concerned about is food security. In a time of emergency, such as an earthquake, it could be a while before help arrives. As we saw in disaster relief with Hurricane Katrina, and with extreme weather conditions a couple of weeks ago in Big Bear, getting supplies to a community can be interrupted. We all need to be prepared to be on our own for a minimum of three days, and as long as two weeks.

This is one reason why Vic and I are growing fruits that ripen throughout the year and maintain a year-round garden. We also keep a supply of water and staples on hand. These staples include flour, rice, potatoes, shortening and a large variety of canned goods. In an emergency, I can cook entire meals and even bake bread on our backyard grill.

Lebow says that everyone who has heard about the Harvest Club thinks that it is a great idea. Now he wants to turn that approval into action. If you have a tree that can be harvested, or want to help in a harvest, give Lebow a call at (714) 847-8669, or send him an e-mail at theharvestclub@gmail.com. They also need help with volunteer coordination, maintaining a harvest calendar, building their website and fundraising. To learn more, visit www.theharvestclub.org. They need you.