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In The Garden: Produce from St. Vincent de Paul garden goes straight to needy neighbors

On Monday mornings during the growing season, Chris Combs and volunteers with the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Omaha harvest vegetables from their Holy Family Center's churchyard garden in north downtown Omaha.

Just hours later, that produce might be served in sack lunches prepared for neighbors experiencing hunger and homelessness.

The garden, located at the Society's district office at 1715 Izard St., is part of the organization's ongoing effort to serve neighbors in need.

Each weekday, volunteers prepare more than 250 sack lunches that are distributed on-site and at nearby low-income housing communities. During the growing season, produce from the garden helps add nutritious ingredients to those meals.

"I'm proud to work for an organization like the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Omaha that strives to ensure all members of our community have access to fresh, nutritious food," Combs said.

Combs, the garden and building coordinator, brings years of experience in organic farming and permaculture to the project. He previously worked on an organic farm in Lincoln and has taught permaculture classes at Metropolitan Community College.

Under his care, the space has developed into a productive urban garden designed to benefit both people and the environment.

Some produce is grown specifically for the Society's sack lunch program, including cherry tomatoes, cucumbers, spinach and sugar snap peas.Other crops — things like kale, collards, Swiss chard, herbs, peppers, beans, potatoes, onions, beets and winter squash — are harvested by Combs and volunteers and delivered to the Society's food pantry, 2101 Leavenworth St., where they are distributed to families and individuals experiencing food insecurity.

Beyond growing food, the Society's Churchyard Garden has become a welcoming green space. Raised garden beds are surrounded by native grasses, flowers and fruiting shrubs such as serviceberry and American plum. The design supports pollinators and birds while offering a peaceful space for guests.

"Many of the people who receive these meals are friends we know by name," said Jill Lynch-Sosa, executive director of the Society of St. Vincent de Paul Omaha. "Being able to provide produce grown right here in our garden is one more way we can show them that they are valued and cared for."

Since 1868, the Society has assisted local families and individuals facing hardship through programs that provide food, clothing, homelessness prevention assistance, disaster relief and outreach to those experiencing homelessness.

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