

FALLBROOK: Farm donating organic produce to needy

Potatoes, corn, tomatoes pledged to Temecula Murrieta Rescue Mission

By AARON CLAVERIE - aclaverie@californian.com | Thursday, June 4, 2009 8:08 PM PDT ∞

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FALLBROOK ---- Troy Conner turned off the whirring weed whacker, wiped the sweat from his brow and pointed to the newly furrowed fields that double as the backyard of his hilltop home.

In those fields, volunteers from area churches were busy erecting fences, planting gopher traps and dumping buckets of rocks into wheelbarrows. Before powering down, Conner had been hacking away at the weeds lining a service road that splits the two fields.

Conner, general manager of the Kendall Farms flower farm in Fallbrook, said the work of the toiling volunteers ---- dozens turned out on an overcast and humid Saturday morning ---- will help turn the fields into a bounty for the area's needy families.

"Corn, zucchini, tomatoes, red onions, peppers and watermelons," he said, listing just a sample of the produce that will be planted, harvested by volunteers and donated to the Temecula Murrieta Rescue Mission.

The mission, a partnership between Temecula's Rancho Community Church and the Orange County Rescue Mission, has been handing out boxes of food to the area's needy families since March.



Bill Katter, 73, hauls a wheelbarrow filled with stones down a hill as volunteers work on the land that has been donated to grow produce for the Temecula Murrieta Rescue Mission. Organizers say more volunteers are needed to help out each Saturday morning. (Photo by John Koster - For The Californian)



When Conner, a member of the church, heard about the effort, he decided to do what he could to help.

"The need is outstripping their resources," he said, talking about the growing number of people who have been helped during the weekly food box distribution.

Officials with the Temecula Murrieta Rescue Mission --- which has handed out more than 43,000 meals in about two months ---- have been effusive in their praise of both Kendall Farms and Conner, who has been spearheading the garden project.

The donation means the mission will be able to supplement the canned goods that make up the bulk of the contents of the food boxes with fresh produce, said David Jones, a church member and the manager of the food box distribution.

"It's like having a full produce department," Jones said.

Conner said the 2 1/2 acres that are being converted into the garden used to be the home of old citrus and avocado groves. Part of the land is his personal property and about an acre's worth is Kendall Farm's land.

Before the Rice Canyon fire of 2007 ripped through the 600-acre farm and destroyed Kendall's entire perennial crop, Conner said he had a certified organic sunflower field.

Conner said getting his garden as certified organic won't be that much different. He added Kendall Farms is donating much of the organic fertilizer and equipment that had been used on the sunflower farm.



Marilyn Schuler cleans stones from the ground as volunteers from Rancho Community Church in Temecula work on the land last Saturday morning. (Photo by John Koster - For The Californian)



Joshua Barret, 15 months, and his mother, Cassy Barret, remove stones from the field as Julia Barret, 3, checks her hand at Kendall Farms in Fallbrook last Saturday. (Photo by John Koster - For The Californian)

Jones, taking a short break from his work in the fields, said numerous area churches have joined with Rancho to help provide the labor for the organic garden.

But more bodies are needed and Jones said the call is going out to get as many people as possible to visit the fields each Saturday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Volunteers are needed to help tend the land, plant seeds, pull weeds and eventually harvest the crops for distribution.

Bill Katter, a 74-year-old whom Conner singled out as one of the most inspiring volunteers, said he drove out to the farm Saturday because he really appreciates the assistance the church provides to area families.

And Katter, a Temecula resident who can normally be found behind a desk during weekdays, said he likes the work.

"I used to have a garden myself and I always liked getting out there and pulling weeds," he said.

Call staff writer Aaron Claverie at 951-676-4315, ext. 2624.

KENDALL FARMS ORGANIC GARDEN

-- When: 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays.

-- Where: Kendall Farms in Fallbrook.

-- What: Volunteers needed to help tend the land, plant seeds and harvest crops at organic garden.

-- Info: To make a donation or inquire about volunteering, call the Temecula Murrieta Rescue Mission at 951-526-1200.