



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

A youth named John, who is part of the Youth Garden project in Watsonville, tends to the pumpkin patch to complete his hours of community service. The program is run in conjunction with the Santa Cruz County Probation Department.

Youth garden grows flowers, confidence

By **KAREN A. DAVIS**
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Some troubled teens are planting seeds for a better future. In the process, they've turned what was an empty, weed-infested lot into a paradise for county workers looking for a nice spot to have lunch.

The Youth Garden project allows juveniles to complete court-ordered community service while interacting with volunteer mentors who share their gardening knowledge. Saturday, the garden will be one of five featured stops on the annual Monterey Bay Master Gardeners Tour.

"It is not the prettiest garden on the tour, but we grow a lot of kids every Saturday morning between 8 a.m. and noon," said Candice McLaren, a Master Gardener volunteer.

About eight youths work in the garden each weekend, completing a portion of their 16- to 30-hour court sentences. Along with rose bushes, sunflowers and grapevines, about 360 youths in all have "grown" through the project since it began in 1998. More than 75 gardeners have pitched in and more than 4,000 volunteer hours have been logged.

Teens are taught to seed, plant, grow, compost and market produce and garden products. When they aren't exercising their green thumbs, they build birdhouses and make flower presses and stepping stones. They have also potted lily bulbs for delivering to a

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local nursing home.

The program is run in conjunction with the Santa Cruz County Probation Department. The garden is located in what was an empty lot owned by the county just behind the courthouse off Freedom Boulevard. Though the garden initially was funded by the department, a Master Gardeners grant and donations from local nurseries, it has grown into a self-sustaining project. Money from the sale of garden products is used to buy new seeds and plants.

Probation officer Bill Best said he often takes vegetables for sale to court on Fridays. Judge Heather Morse is a fan of the Swiss chard the teens grow.

"We are serving the community by having these kids learn skills that will last them a lifetime," Best said. "They walk away from here with a respect for the earth, themselves and others. That's the best of what we do."

During breaks, teens help prepare a pasta lunch using the veggies they've grown. Each week, two teens are responsible for chronicling the day's weather, temperature and activities in a journal. The hope is that the

youths will learn about more than gardening as they tend to the flowers and herbs that have taken root on the quarter-acre plot.

"In spite of the reason these kids are doing community service, we hope they leave the Youth Garden with some skill and confidence for growing plants from seeds and a connection to the earth," McLaren said.

"There is something magical about seeing what you sow spring magically from the ground," Best agreed. "It renews (the teens) and us, too."

The Watsonville program has proved so successful that a second Youth Garden was begun in March in Santa Cruz, said Tara Fisher, deputy probation officer. That garden is tended by juveniles assigned to a residential drug and alcohol treatment program.

"I never thought I would be capable of building a watering system," said one young man at the facility for his previous gang involvement. "Now, I might even go to school and study horticulture."

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