

Growing a HOPE Garden

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In 2017, five counties and over 2,000 people were fed with the garden. Approximately 2,800 lbs of produce was delivered to food banks, community organizations and food insecure churches. Jones recalls one shipment of lettuce that weighed 26 lbs — “It was leaf lettuce! That’s a lot of lettuce!”

The total yield of 2,800 lbs in 2017 is down from 3,300 lbs in 2016, and there’s a good reason. “The first year, we grew a lot of sweet corn,” explains Jones. “Well, truthfully, sweet corn — people like it — but it’s starch. It just turns to sugar. And it weighs a lot.” Last year, volunteers replaced sweet corn plants with those higher in nutritional value (such as tomatoes and leafy greens), which weigh less.

The HOPE Garden team is keen to experiment and improve. Currently, a few yellow tomato plants are being cultivated in sealed hydroponic containers. “This year we’re going to plant a lot more sweet potatoes, because sweet potatoes are good carbs,” tells Jones.

Beautification projects are underway for the garden, and the concept of creating a food forest (a type of garden in which plants thrive due to companion planting) is being discussed. Long term discussions have also revolved around building a pond to provide a self-contained water source, installing solar paneling, planting nut trees and providing educational cooking classes.

And because aeroponic lettuce is difficult to grow in summer heat, the team is looking at another use for the pods — a summer strawberry garden. For the project, the pods will be taken apart and cleaned, then moved outdoors, where the strawberries will be cultivated on a southern-facing porch. Jones considers the strawberry garden experiment



This view of the North side of Memorial Hospital Lodge, shows the stretch of land known as HOPE Garden.

as the first step toward planting an orchard.

“We want to start with the strawberries — those kinds of berries — strawberries, blueberries, blackberries, raspberries,” explains Jones, “because it takes a lot of skill to get an orchard going — a long time as well.”

Currently the garden has only a small amount of refrigeration space. (Most vegetables do not require refrigeration. Fruits do.) Because the property that houses HOPE Garden was once an equestrian compound, the idea of transforming horse stalls into walk-in coolers has been proposed. Jones shows off a horse grooming station that has already been re-purposed into a spacious and functional vegetable prepping area. “We wash

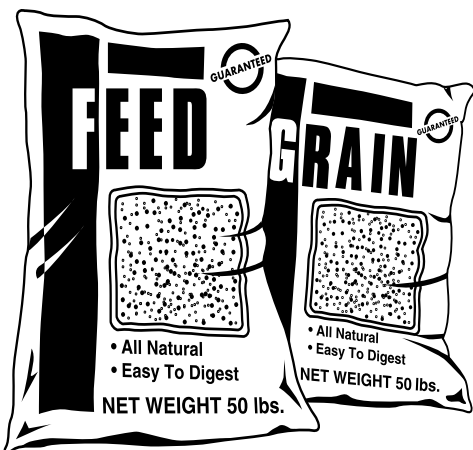
our veggies, we weigh them, we box them and we ship them,” he explains.

Individuals and organizations interested in volunteering at HOPE Garden may contact Mike Jones at 812-996-8426. The garden is located at Memorial Hospital Lodge, 2590 S. Newton Street, Jasper.

The HOPE Garden is particularly interested in the educational opportunity that volunteering provides area youth and children. Jones explains that “making children a part of the process” is of the highest importance at HOPE.

“The idea for us,” says Jones, “was if we can get people eating healthy, maybe they’ll stay out of the hospital.”

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New addition — A recently constructed, unadorned stairway leads to the HOPE Garden fields. Long term, Jones hopes to see ornamental trees and shrubs planted that will beautify garden paths.