

GARDEN BRINGS BOUNTY *Home*



**Facing state and
local requirements
head on keeps a
successful resident
organic gardening
project on track.**

**LEE ANN LABRIE AND
DEBORAH PACYNA**

Thirty pounds of fresh yellow squash and zucchini, in addition to 20 watermelons, only scratches the surface of the harvest that the garden at Crestwood Manor skilled nursing facility in Fremont, Calif., brings each year.

At less than two years old, the garden's high-yielding, year-round crop list includes cabbage, lettuce, tomatoes, cauliflower, carrots, beans, onions, broccoli, cucumbers, beets, peppers, tomatoes, corn, artichokes, and garlic.

There's also a separate herb garden with fresh mint, tarragon, oregano, basil, fennel, and parsley. A neatly lined row of dwarf fruit trees, including nectarines, cherries, plums, pluots, and apples, frames one side of the half-acre garden.



Residents enjoy planting crops from seed, and they monitor their progress daily.

And with flowers like lilies, irises, and sunflowers in full bloom, there are weekly deliveries to grateful residents, like Hope, whose face lights up when fragrant bouquets are brought inside to brighten her room.

Field Of Dreams

For several years before the garden began to take shape, Crestwood Manor Administrator Lee Ann Labrie had been mulling over plans to use the vacant lot next door to build a park-like



setting for residents, but no formal plan ever evolved.

Only after her brother, Randal Thompson, an artist and photographer from Eureka Springs, Ark., toured the property, did the first seeds of inspiration sprout. Thompson put his sister in touch with local artist and horticulturist Keith Vinson, who offered a vision for the property.

“Where I saw uneven dirt and dead grass, Keith saw corn stalks and melons,” says Labrie. “I saw weeds and hard work, Keith saw gardening groups and sunflowers.” It was a great meeting that led to an action plan that quickly sprang into place, Labrie says.

Over the next few months, Crestwood’s maintenance team paved wheelchair-accessible paths and cement pods for tables and chairs, while sod was brought in for the picnic area.

Vinson installed an underground sprinkler system with a timer so watering could take place at night or in the early morning hours, and the facility chipped in to purchase a small rototiller and building materials for an equipment shed.

Group Effort

“Because the residents enjoy planting crops from seed so they can monitor the progress of their work each week, I built a cold-frame seedling box with a

temperature-actuated venting system,” says Vinson.

“When the box is hot, the lid rises, and when it is cold, it shuts to protect the seeds. This gave the seeds a helpful start for the gardening group to plant.”

As if that weren’t enough, the city of Fremont generously planted a dozen trees, mostly crepe myrtles and jacarandas, outside the perimeter of the fenced area in celebration of Arbor Day.

The group purchased a small greenhouse and began the process of organizing for the spring and summer planting, using additional seeds purchased from a mail-order company in Oregon and transplants from Vinson’s own garden.

The program officially kicked off in May 2008. With wheelchair access to raised beds and open spaces and a few shaded seating areas, a core group of

Residents plant and harvest two or three times each week, and everyone can enjoy the results.

residents began the first planting. “Many in our population grew up in the Depression era, and gardening for them was a necessity,” says Andrea Monahan, Crestwood’s clinical director. “Now it can be an enjoyable pastime. It’s not only a way to get connected back to the earth, it also provides a form of exercise.”

Regulations Present Challenge

With the growing season well under way, staff enthusiasm was curbed by concerns that Crestwood Manor could be in violation of F-tag 371—the code that governs the storage, preparation, distribution, and serving of food under sanitary conditions—if it put produce from the garden on the kitchen menu.

And then there were the state and local regulations to contend with. Crestwood was not a licensed organic producer, even though Vinson was practicing organic gardening methods.

With concerns the facility would be in violation of state and federal regulations, Labrie decided the best course of action would be to call various agencies and inquire about what should be done.

While the Alameda County licensing agency was very supportive, there

were unsubstantiated reports of other California facilities with backyard gardens that had received negative survey licensing results.

Becoming Organic

Unfortunately, the urban garden was a “first” for each official who was contacted. While expressing approval of the concept of the garden, without guidelines in place, county officials were not quite sure where to begin.

After consulting with the state organic program coordinator, county officials decided the best course of action was for Crestwood to apply to become a registered organic producer. The application process was fairly simple and included listing the pesticides used in the garden and around the facility grounds, a property description, production plans, a site history of the property, and paying an inexpensive annual fee.

Coordination among the county, state, and local licensing agencies helped to address policies and procedures governing food safety and sanitation. Policies were also crafted to ensure safety in the garden area.

Finally, staff received training regarding the new regulations, and within a few months, organic produce was introduced into the dining program.

Fruits Of Their Labor

Amid sunflowers that towered nine feet high, the garden group plants and harvests a couple of times a week. As they break from working the soil, they often enjoy a refreshing treat of watermelon or strawberries grown just a few feet away.

It’s a full sensory experience that includes an appreciation of being outdoors and working the soil, watching the fluttering of occasional butterflies, and taking in regular visits from hummingbirds and finches while enjoying the fruits of their labor.

The garden has resulted in a renewed interest in a cooking class among

residents to complement the gardening group. Residents and employees now get to snack on healthy vegetables from the garden, sample zucchini bread, and feast on treats like watermelon and cantaloupe.

Initially met with a little skepticism, the organic garden has since inspired Dietary Manager Marilyn Moore and her staff to embrace cooking organic foods and experiment with their own version of culture change, beginning with the first meal of the day.

Flexible Dining Option

While a well-balanced breakfast is served each morning between 8 a.m. and 9 a.m., residents can also sign up to sleep in and enjoy a “sleepyhead breakfast” later in the morning. About half of the residents now wake up later and visit a well-stocked breakfast bar where they can enjoy a lighter breakfast of

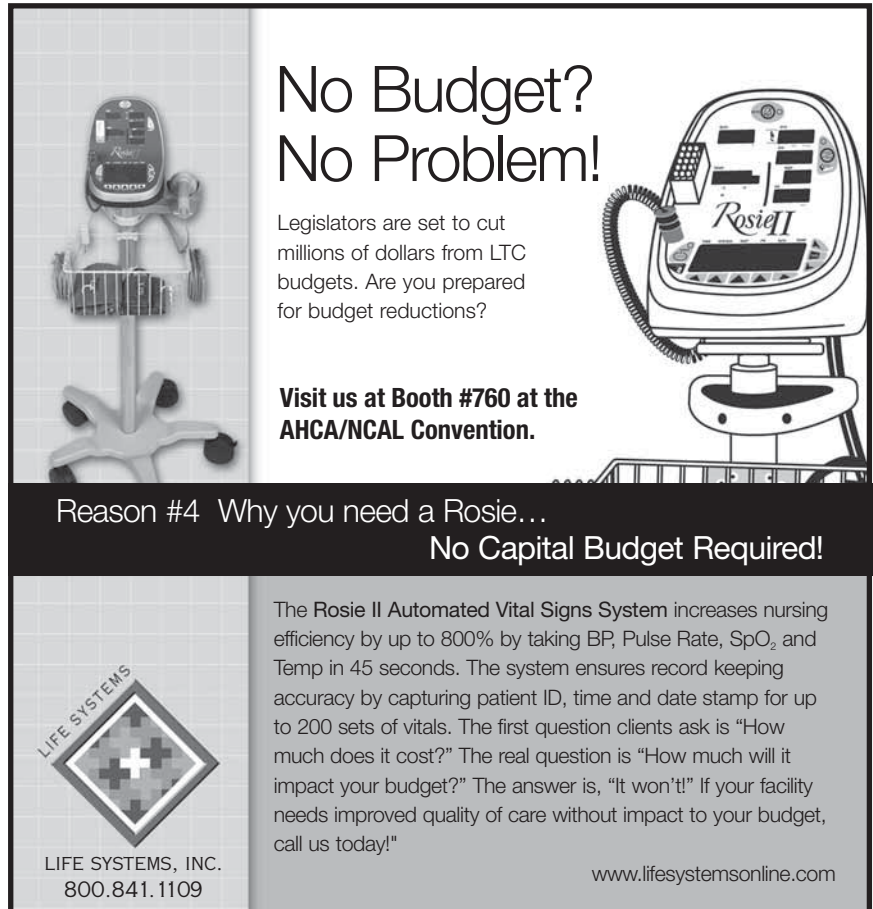
yogurt, bagels and cream cheese, and, of course, fresh fruit from the garden.

The garden works on a number of levels for each of the residents, building self esteem in some cases and offering a relaxing way station at the beginning or end of the day.

“This is a place of peace,” says Labrie. “It’s a calming environment and a quiet setting to bring someone who may have had a frustrating day.”

At Crestwood Manor, the garden has become the centerpiece for culture change, helping staff overcome challenges and bringing a sense of inspiration and knowledge that resident-centered care is an ever-evolving process. ■

LEE ANN LABRIE is administrator at Crestwood Manor in Fremont, Calif., and DEBORAH PACYNA is public affairs director for the California Association of Health Facilities.



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