

# Community program helps families grow fresh produce in their backyard

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Claudia Ortega has avoided the outdoors for most of her life. Extremely allergic to all of nature's greenery — including grass, plants and pollen — she's spent her time away from the sights and smells that most people look to for comfort and inner peace.

But she knew she was missing out. So when her family moved from Milpitas to San Jose about two years ago, Ortega — determined to grow a green thumb — joined La Mesa Verde, a network of gardeners who work together to create better access to fresh, organic food in San Jose with the cultivation of produce in urban spaces.

More than a year later, Ortega grows everything from cucumbers and zucchinis to chili peppers and strawberries in the family's expansive backyard.



Guests arrive at Claudia Ortega's garden during La Mesa Verde's 4th Annual Garden Tour sponsored by Sacred Heart Community Service in San Jose, on Saturday, August 25, 2018. (LiPo Ching/Bay Area News Group)

“I said, ‘I’ve got to try something I’ve never done before,’” said a tearful Ortega Saturday, during a tour of several of the gardens created through La Mesa Verde, a program by Sacred Heart Community Services. “It’s been wonderful for our family. We’ve been doing this together. We share vegetables with our neighbors.”

La Mesa Verde has built home gardens for about 700 families since its inception in 2009. The program continues to grow today, with a community garden planned next year at the Evans Lane housing development. The garden will sit on a portion of the six-acre development in the city's Guadalupe Canoas neighborhood.

The program is particularly critical for low-income families who don't always have space or resources to build a home garden, which can easily exceed \$1,500 for materials and labor, according to Sacred Heart. A 4-by-8-foot raised bed can yield up to 200 pounds of organic produce in a single season and is often the only source of fresh, organic fruits and veggies for low-income families, the organization said.

“Even if you only grow a few tomatoes, that small amount of help balances out some cost,” said Jacqueline Rivera, interim organizing manager of La Mesa Verde. “People are always talking about the cost of living being so high here. Folks are left to balance out their rent with their food budget, so this helps.”

About a dozen people roamed Ortega's backyard Saturday, in awe of her shiny cucumbers and the sweetness of her strawberries. With a stunning backdrop of San Jose's foothills, the family garden has become Ortega's sanctuary. She makes sure to shower immediately after gardening and takes multivitamins to help fend off her allergies.

Though most of the program's gardens are built in individual homes, it's grown to include community gardens cared for by participants who are handpicked for the program.

The communal garden at Escuela Popular — shared by five community members employed at the school — is a lush, green labyrinth of corn stalks, apple trees, sunflowers and several large beds growing onions, cilantro, tomatoes, pumpkins, chard and eggplant.

“We've gotten a lot of help on how to cultivate and grow the best product,” said Victor Hernandez, one of the gardeners. “Part of that includes production of a healthy product. We don't use any chemicals, it's all organic.

“All of us here share what we grow and we know it's healthy,” he continued.

“Sometimes, we share with the families who come to the school because they don't always have an opportunity to grow a garden in their homes.”

The tour was special for Ansilla Barrandeguy, of the San Jose Garden Club. Part of the proceeds from the club's annual plant sale go to places like La Mesa Verde. On Saturday, Barrandeguy got to see the fruits of those donations.

“Not everybody can have a big backyard,” she said. “When people collaborate and come together to garden, they learn from each other, they're encouraged from each other and they can support one another to keep the gardens going.”