

The Path's field of greens

Organization offers food cooperative

By Chris Van Ormer

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The taste is fresh.

"Once people try locally grown, they keep coming back for a reason," said DuWayne Sipper, of The Path of Citrus County. "It's healthier, more nutritious. It has so many advantages. It has no preservatives or wax. It tastes better."

The description is about farm-fresh vegetables grown in a 10-acre field in Hernando by people with The Path.

For about three years, organic vegetables have been grown as part of the program of The Path. This produce helps people feed themselves and others. During the winter harvest, The Path gave about 5,000 pounds of vegetables to county food pantries. Its winter crop included broccoli, turnip greens, collards, bok choy, romaine, red lettuce, kohlrabi and cauliflower.

For the spring, Sipper said they would grow cherry tomatoes, three varieties of eggplant, two kinds of okra, squash, zucchini, cantaloupes and cucumbers, to name a few.

With the experience of more than three years, the farmers have learned to stagger planting time to ensure a steady crop.

"We've taught ourselves a lot," Sipper said. "We had to figure out the weather patterns, freezes, what varieties and species we could grow."

Vegetables are grown using organic principles, with no chemical fertilizers. The soil is enriched with manure and lake muck. The spring crop also will be fertilized with sea salt.

"It puts the minerals back in the land and in the vegetables," Sipper said.

As an experiment, The Path started to offer a food cooperative with the winter crop. Twenty-six people signed up. They got an assortment of winter vegetables each week.

"Now, we feel we are stronger in growing a crop and giving the public what they want," Sipper said.

The farm should be able to serve 50 food co-op members for the spring crop. Sipper is inviting county residents to attend the 2011 Path Farm Co-op membership meeting from 6 to 7 p.m. Friday in Room 208, second floor classroom in the conference center of the College of Central Florida in Lecanto.

Those who attend can continue their membership or sign up for the first time for The Path's Farm Co-op.

"We have done some research into other co-ops in the state of Florida, and will be setting up our 2011 membership as two six-month programs, with membership periods of March-September 2011 and September-March 2012," said Katherine Sipper, development director.

Membership fee will be set at \$300 per period. Each week, each member will receive a "banana box" of seasonal produce — whatever is ready for harvest that day.

The Path has been in operation since 2001 to help homeless men, women and children. It aims to provide a structured, nurturing living environment for anyone who has become homeless through many services and programs.



The field of greens has worked in sync with The Path's mission.

"We're on the crest of a big wave," Sipper said. "Americans are looking at the old ways of producing nutritious food. No one else in Citrus is doing what we are. In fact, we are looking for more land. We would like to hear from anyone in the Hernando area who would be looking for an agriculture exemption."

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MATTHEW BECK

Justin Jones cuts a fresh head of romaine lettuce from the field early Wednesday morning in Hernando. Fellow worker Jim Gaynier is at left.



MATTHEW BECK

Doug DeNardin moves a cart of romaine lettuce to another location in the field.



MATTHEW BECK

Doug DeNardin, left, and Justin Jones harvest some lettuce from The Path's field.



MATTHEW BECK

Each member of The Path's Co-op will receive a "banana box" each week of the various seasonal vegetables harvested.