

by Kristi Rector



Photo courtesy of The Path of Citrus County

RICH GROUND FOR BOUNTIFUL GROWTH

One mission's farm provides job training for clients and produces food for the community

Florida is known for growing juicy, sweet oranges. But tucked into a corner of north-central Florida in Beverly Hills, The Path of Citrus County rescue mission has taken the art of growing to a new level. Through a working farm—run by the mission and worked by long-term guests looking for a new start—The Path teaches work ethic, provides job training, and produces food for the nearby community. ▶

The farm covers 15 acres now, producing many types of greens, peppers, cruciferous vegetables, squash, and more. **For the next step, The Path is negotiating to buy a hotel that already has a restaurant in it.**

Work Therapy

Working on the farm gives residents of The Path meaningful work to do while building them up physically, developing a strong work ethic, and learning to do something productive. "We discovered that it was the perfect work therapy," says Executive Director DuWayne Sipper. "Not only were people coming and getting fresh air and detoxing from drugs and alcohol, trying to get their cases straight, but then they started learning about vegetables and working. It was a huge shock to them to actually put seeds in the ground and watch something they planted grow. So that was therapy in itself."

DuWayne's wife, Kathryn—who leads development and community relations for the mission—says that when the guys leave the farm to go work at Walmart or somewhere else in the community, it's easy for them and they get promoted because they know how to work hard.

DuWayne adds, "Nothing trains these guys to go back to work better than that farm out there. Some of these guys, when they checked in here, felt they were worthless. But now they can outwork us, because that's how strong the farm makes them in the fresh air working just five or six hours a day."

Farm Beginnings

The Path's farm project began in 2002 and originally started to address malnutrition among clients and supplement the mission's food supply with fresh vegetables. "We found that churches are sitting on a lot of land, and if they're not building anything on it, why not grow food?" DuWayne says. His pastor thought it was a great idea and loaned them land for two years. That was 10 years ago. "So we're wondering how many other churches are sitting on land that rescue missions could use to grow food to do work therapy," says DuWayne, especially since food is the biggest need for missions.

The Sippers were not farmers, so they did a lot of research and taught themselves the best ways to grow vegetables. "When we first started I was a little cheap and didn't want to buy fertilizer," DuWayne says, "so we tried to do it with natural methods, and we found out that natural methods were the way to go." He also started growing hydroponically in a small area right outside of his office. "I have yet to have a donor walk in here and not be shocked and delighted to see our hydroponic farm right in front of the office," he says.

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and as chefs or wait staff, while serving locally grown vegetables to the public. "Now the clients win because they're getting job trained in another way—not just working on the farm. And the mission's interaction with the community will be priceless," DuWayne says.

Community

After several years of operating the farm, the Sippers realized that they were receiving more private grants for the farm than they were for the shelter. The community began to realize that "we weren't just sticking our hands out for money every year, that we were actually trying to support ourselves and do the work therapy," says DuWayne. "And so bar none, of all the work therapies that we've tried here on the property and in the bargain stores, the farming is the best."

With a growing interest in the naturally grown movement, buying local food, and knowing where their food was coming from, DuWayne says, "It didn't take too long before our public, our donors, started calling and saying, 'We want your food.'"

So the farm set up a food co-op for the community. People pay $500–600 a year for a membership, and every Friday they receive a basket of fresh vegetables from the farm. "The farm never made money. In fact, the mission lost a lot of money over the years doing the ▶

Don't Believe the 'We Can't Do That Here' Myth

"I hear people say, 'We can't grow food in our area.' Yes, you can; it's just a matter of knowledge," says DuWayne Sipper, executive director of The Path of Citrus County. "It doesn't matter if you have weather problems or soil problems. We have both."

The Path Farm is located in north Florida, where it gets cold in the winter (down into the 20s) and hot in the summer (in the 90s). Yet in the last three years, they've been able to grow food all 12 months of the year.

But what about urban missions surrounded by concrete in the middle of downtown? "Even an urban mission will know of churches in the suburbs that have land," DuWayne says. "My farm is 25 minutes away by truck from the shelter."

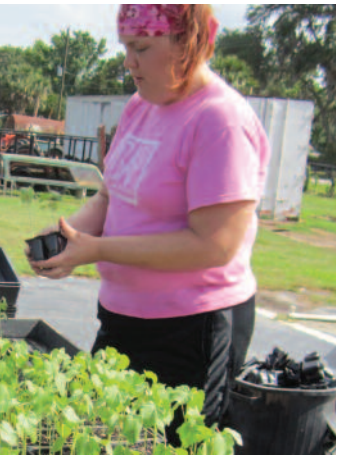
A second option is to think beyond a plot of land. Think rooftop farming. Parking lot farming. Hydroponic farming. DuWayne's hydroponic garden is only 10 feet by 30 feet, but it produces a lot of food. He has seen food grown in tires, bottles, buckets—and even spices grown in a soda can. "It's a matter of knowledge—how do you provide enough oxygen and air and water and germination in the right nutrients to the plant? That's where people have to do their homework," he says. "You can't just throw some seeds in the ground, because I tried that and it doesn't work. All it does is get your feelings hurt."

The key is to simply get started, but don't start big. DuWayne encourages starting small. If you start big you're going to quit because there's too much of a learning curve. You need to learn a bit of the science behind successful growing, and get some help from "old-timers" who still know how to grow the old-fashioned way.

"If you get hungry, you're not going to go out and learn how to grow your own food tomorrow," DuWayne says. "I want to urge rescue missions that are feeling the same tap on the shoulder from God that I did to start growing. If you discover what I've discovered about growing food in your mission, you'll be convinced. There will be no turning back."

—Kristi Rector

Photos courtesy of The Path of Citrus County










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farm, but we simply considered it to be ministry—part of our programs," DuWayne says. "But then the co-op started helping us balance the books a little bit."

Word began to spread. Food banks get the least amount of fresh vegetables and meat donated, so nearby food banks began wanting The Path farm's vegetables. "So this thing has spider-webbed and taken off," DuWayne says. The farm can't grow all the vegetables people want, so they found benefit in partnering with others.

A woman who runs a fruit stand near the farm also wanted The Path's vegetables, "so we helped build her business," DuWayne says. "And the people coming in, when they found out that they were supporting a shelter by buying some of our food, her business exploded! They just loved the idea of supporting locally."

Nutrition

Through the mission's farm, the Sippers wanted to introduce the idea of better nutrition into the shelter. "We want our clients to learn how to cook the vegetables they helped grow," explains Kathryn. The mission focuses on teaching guests about foods that are healthy and how to introduce vitamins back into the diet.

"We're so accustomed to bland-tasting supermarket vegetables—once you eat this food, because of the nutrition factor in it and the taste, it's all you want. You will never go to the supermarket again," Kathryn says.

When they were looking at what the farm should produce, she says, "Everybody wants to grow tomatoes." However, DuWayne studied alkaline vegetables and learned that American diets are extremely acidic. When you're dealing with people in recovery, they have a lot of digestive issues. "So we discovered that greens grow really well in the winter," says Kathryn. "Our kale is in such high demand that our produce man can't keep enough—they sell out as soon as we put it out there."

By combining old ideas of growing your own food with new, scientific advances in plant production, The Path's farm has discovered a way of feeding and training their guests while providing a vital resource for the community.

"The first three or four years were extremely hard, but I'm so glad that I obeyed the Lord," DuWayne says. "Is farming hard work? Yes it is! But it's worth it." ◀

What Is Hydroponics?

The most basic definition of hydroponics is plants grown without soil. According to Simply Hydroponics and Organics, "If you give a plant exactly what it needs, when it needs it, in the amount that it needs, the plant will be as healthy as is genetically possible. With hydroponics this is an easy task; in soil it is far more difficult."

In hydroponics, plants are grown in a substance that doesn't interact with them at all. Sometimes this means the roots grow directly in water; or they might grow in fiber, gravel, sand, or another medium. Then a perfectly balanced, pH-adjusted nutrient solution—a combination of water and fertilizer—is given to the roots. This allows the plant to soak up food with very little effort; in soil, the roots must find and extract nutrients. With hydroponics, you can control everything the plants receive, from the pH to the strength of the nutrient solution, to give them exactly what they need.

—Kristi Rector

Kristi, Rescue's *assistant editor, has been a magazine writer and editor for 20 years, as well as a contributing author for devotionals and curriculum. She and her husband, Jess, are the parents of three children. Email her at kristiwrites@gmail.com.*

