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Want a free garden? New initiative will help, in exchange for donations for Centre County families

BY HOLLY RIDDLE *FOR THE CDT.*
UPDATED NOVEMBER 27, 2020 7:56 AM

Ken Lipson and Bill Zimmer of the "Think We, Not Me" community food growing program discuss produce on Lipson's land in June 2019. The program has distributed more than 15,000 pounds of produce to area food banks and other organizations. ABBY DREY *ADREY@CENTREDAILY.COM*

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Last year, the "Think We, Not Me" community food growing program distributed more than 15,000 pounds of produce to area food banks and other organizations that provide fresh, healthy produce to Centre County families in need. Looking to 2021, the organization has introduced a new initiative that organizers hope will double the amount of produce donated.

The organization has put together a "get a garden, gift a garden" program, wherein community members will volunteer time, labor and land, and, in return, receive a half garden of produce for their own consumption. The other half of the produce they raise over the season will be given back to the organization for distribution around the county.

Community members inform organizers of the amount of land they want to allocate to the program, and then Think We, Not Me provides seeds and seedlings for the produce that will be returned to the program, the seeds and seedlings for the volunteer's personal use, any gardening expertise or advice required and then tilling services to prepare the allocated land for use. While Think We, Not Me will determine what produce the volunteers will grow for donation, volunteers can grow a range of items for their own consumption, with choices from an extensive list of crops.

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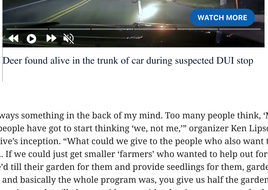

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"It was always something in the back of my mind. Too many people think, 'Me, me, me,' and people have got to start thinking 'we, not me,'" organizer Ken Lipson said of the initiative's inception. "What could we give to the people who also want to grow with us? ... If we could just get smaller 'farmers' who wanted to help out for the food banks, we'd till their garden for them and provide seedlings for them, gardening expertise, and basically the whole program was, you give us half the garden that you're preparing and we'll also provide you with what is necessary to do the other half for yourself."

With the help of an unnamed sponsor, the program — which previously relied solely on organizers' private land use for growing, as well as, up until 2020, land from Penn State — is also expanding its production to a plot of land near University Park Airport, on which organizers hope to grow up to 10,000 pounds of sweet corn. The sponsor is likewise providing a small budget with which to cover costs of the "get a garden, gift a garden" initiative. Other costs will be covered via additional donations from the organization's GoFundMe page and a website, the latter coming in 2021.

Organizers endeavor to recruit 10-15 participants for the "get a garden, gift a garden" program.

However, even with all the donated land, Think We, Not Me still requires a large amount of manpower to get all donation-ready produce from the land to distribution centers, such as Centre County YMCA, State College Food Bank and the FaithCentre in Bellefonte — and the number of distribution centers that the organization serves continues to increase.

"We've increased our distribution centers from five or six to maybe 20, even this year, with COVID," organizer Karen Robinson said. "We've really spread our donations throughout Centre County, through the various distribution centers. We have a commitment to ... making sure ... we proportionally donate to those organizations that reach the greatest number of individuals who need our assistance."

Volunteers made this year's 15,000 pounds of donated produce possible, and Robinson stressed the need for even more volunteers in 2021, as she and her team eye a 30,000-pound goal for next summer.

"I'm hoping, for next season, to really, really raise awareness of how desperately we need volunteers, especially younger volunteers. A lot of our volunteers are 55 or older, which is awesome. They have experience, they have commitment and all those wonderful things that come with age and experience," she said. "On the other hand, some of our tours are a bit laborious, especially in the field prep area and even in some of the planting and harvesting. While we're endeared to those volunteers that we have, we could always use more. Our efforts to serve are only limited by the number of volunteers we can source."

To participate in the "get a garden, gift a garden" program or volunteer, community members are encouraged to reach out to Robinson at gmkarrob4@gmail.com. Financial donations can be made on the organization's GoFundMe page, https://www.gofundme.com/f/think-we-not-me-community-gardening-program.

This story was originally published November 27, 2020 7:00 AM.

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