



March 20, 2009

Community gardens see a rise in thefts

Saturday workshop offers strategies for loss prevention

By Lauren Ober, Free Press staff writer

So it's come to this — not even community gardens are safe from thieves.

In the past two years, Burlington's 11 community gardens have seen a sharp rise in the number of gardeners claiming their produce has been pilfered.

To stem the rising tide of vegetable liberation, Burlington Area Community Gardens is sponsoring a free workshop Saturday that will outline strategies for loss prevention. Jim Flint, executive director of Friends of Burlington Gardens, is leading the workshop.

"It's gotten to the point where we really need to have this conversation," Flint said. "This really violates a sense of trust." Flint has cultivated a community garden plot for years and has experienced his share of theft. Last year his plot at Starr Farm was hit several times. He lost a half-dozen ripe red peppers, unripe sugar baby watermelons and almost all of his butternut squash. After the thefts, he felt shocked and angry that someone would take the food he worked hard to grow.

Community gardeners have always known that theft is a reality, Flint said. Their plots are generally open to the public and it's not uncommon to have a tomato missing here, a zucchini there. But the stealing has gotten worse, said Lisa Coven, community garden coordinator for Burlington Department of Parks and Recreation. And it's going to continue to get worse as people lose their jobs, food prices go up and the economy suffers, Coven said.

"Vegetables are going to look like dollars," Coven said.

As the cost of food climbs, produce plundering has increased. Flint and Wendy Coe, volunteer site coordinator at the Tommy Thompson community garden at Burlington's Intervale, have seen people with shopping bags taking produce from gardens that weren't theirs. On more than one occasion, Coe has stopped people taking pumpkins from her neighbors' plots.

Many of the people caught in the act say they thought "community garden" meant that the produce was available for everyone. Flint and Coe tend not to buy that explanation, but there are families that don't speak English who occasionally misunderstand the purpose of the gardens, they say.

A fence with a locking entrance seems like the simplest theft deterrent, but that's not the vibe the community garden program is going for, Coven said. Plus, with 350 community garden plots in the city, it's just not practical.

"You can't put a 6-foot chain-link fence around every garden," Coven said.

"We want the gardens to be open to the public, but it leaves them open to people who are taking food," Flint said.

The workshop will focus on other strategies that will help deter thieves. Flint recommends gardeners

build a small boundary around their plots at the beginning of the growing season either with twine or light fencing. Flowers also work well as a boundary since most people are taught not to step on them, Flint said.

Community gardeners also need to take good care of their plots. People often justify theft by saying that the gardener wasn't maintaining his or her plot and thus the produce was going to waste. Flint recommends mulching the walkways, keeping the weeds down and harvesting the produce in a timely fashion.

If possible, Flint said, don't plant high-value produce like peppers, small watermelons or pumpkins near the edge of the garden. Coe, who has been gardening at Tommy Thompson for 25 years, suggests hiding pumpkin plants in rows of corn so they are not exposed when they become ripe.

"I don't know why people love pumpkins," Coe said. "It's almost like you're growing teddy bears in your garden."

Contact Lauren Ober at 660-1868 or lober@bfp.burlingtonfreepress.com, Sign up for Free Press headlines, delivered free to your e-mail, at www.burlingtonfreepress.com

Additional Facts

If you go

- *WHAT: Minimize Produce Pilfering workshop*
- *WHEN: 10 a.m.-noon, Saturday*
- *WHERE: Miller Community & Recreation Center, Gosse Court*
- *COST: Free, open to the public*
- *INFO: Department of Parks & Recreation asks people preregister for the workshop. Call 863-0420 to sign up.*

Any one interested in getting one of the remaining community garden plots, should contact Lisa Coven at 863-0420. The plots are nearly two-thirds taken and Coven anticipates that they will be gone by the beginning of April. Plots cost between \$20-\$60, depending on size and whether the gardener resides in Burlington.
