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Vermonters celebrate Obama veggie garden

By Sally Pollak, Free Press Staff Writer

Linda Cannon-Huffman has a little vegetable garden in her yard in Eden.

The food she grows for herself tastes fresher and richer than vegetables she buys in the supermarket, Cannon-Huffman said. Planting seeds and harvesting in the Eden earth comes with a certain satisfaction.

"There's nothing like walking out to the garden a half hour before you put the peas or the beans or the collards in the pot and then cooking them and eating them," Cannon-Huffman said.

She was one of 100,000 people to sign a petition calling for the Obama family to plant a vegetable garden at the White House, the first since Eleanor Roosevelt's victory garden.

On Friday, First Lady Michelle Obama answered that call with shovel in hand, and with Washington fifth-graders assisting the effort. Michelle Obama said the president will help weed the rows of vegetables.

She envisions the garden providing more than organic vegetables for her family and White House guests. The First Lady hopes the garden plot will help educate children, families and communities about healthful eating, she told *The New York Times*.

Vermont gardeners and local food advocates believe the White House garden is likely to influence in a positive way sustainable agriculture and nutrition. As a rural state with a strong agricultural tradition — and as a national leader in the local food movement — Vermonters also can influence gardening at the national level, according to area experts.

"I think we're kind of co-inspiring each other," said Tom Stearns, owner of High Mowing Seeds in Wolcott. Stearns, president of the board of the Center for an Agricultural Economy in Hardwick, was speaking by cell phone from Florida. He is in the south to talk about establishing sustainable, regional food systems.

"Because it's at the White House, that is something that for many people is going to be uniquely inspiring and it's getting a lot of attention. It's great," Stearns said. "I'm so thrilled that they're using their influence at the top in these sorts of ways.

"In Vermont, the news about agriculture in the last few years has solidified Vermont as the leader in the healthy food system movement. At the federal level and in other states, people are getting inspired by what we're doing in Vermont."

High Mowing seeds have made their way to Washington through grassroots groups, Stearns said. Whether his lettuce, kale, chard and salad greens will sprout on the White House lawn, Stearns is unsure.

In Burlington, there are about 400 community garden plots, feeding an estimated 1,600 people, said Jim Flint, executive director of Friends of Burlington Gardens.

"Everybody in the gardening community is very excited about this," Flint said.

It's important for many reasons, he said.

These include:

- The grassroots, family-style approach to the project. The White House plot is 1,100 square feet, not much bigger than the 750-square foot plots common in Burlington community gardens
- Involving children in the project, which advocates hope will influence school garden projects
- Michelle Obama's emphasis on nutrition and healthy eating
- An economical way to eat fresh, healthful foods (The White House garden is estimated to cost \$200, according to news reports)

"The climate has changed," Flint said. "The leadership and example we're seeing from Washington is creating national interest and creating what we hope will be a model for other states to follow.

"Gardening is hard work. Creating them in a sustainable way is very hard work."

As part of the lobbying effort to create a White House garden, John Hayden of Jeffersonville was nominated to be the White House farmer. Hayden owns and manages the Farm Between, an 18-acre diversified farm that raises vegetables and livestock. He received more than 1,400 votes in two days, Hayden wrote in an e-mail.

The example set by Michelle Obama will inspire people to think they, too, can plant and grow vegetables, Hayden thinks.

"A White House Garden is a very powerful symbol in many ways," Hayden wrote. "With the economic downturn, people are looking for meaningful and cost effective ways to spend their time. I think that a lot of the ills of our society stem from our losing contact with nature. What better way to lift your spirits, increase your self sufficiency, improve your nutrition and your bottom line than digging in the soil and growing some food?"

Wendy Sue Harper, vegetable and fruit advisor for NOFA-Vermont, said she and her co-workers think "gardening is going to explode this year."

She is planning a series of summer gardening workshops, and is making certain to include workshops at all skill levels in preparation for the growing interest. Harper and a colleague at Vermont FEED — a farm-to-school program — expect the White House garden will be a positive influence on children's diets.

"If kids have that seed in their hands, and they put it in the ground and it grows, they're going to eat that vegetable," Harper said. "It's always good for kids to eat more vegetables."

In Montpelier, Martin Kemple is co-founder of a nonprofit organization, Food Works at Two Rivers Center, which develops and supports local food production and distribution. The center's projects include summer camps that teach kids about growing and cooking farm-fresh food and an organic farm that grows vegetables for nonprofit organizations and low-income people.

The White House garden demonstrates a kind of trickle up agriculture, Kemple said.

"We're thrilled that what we've been around here for 20 years-plus, even two centuries — growing our own food in our own yards — and it's finally trickled up all the way to the White House," Kemple said.

With 200 years of gardening experience, what might Vermont's growing tip to the White House be?

"A garden itself is just planting a seed for much bigger growth in the wider community, in society at

large," Kemple said.

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