

## MIDDLETOWN

## Community garden takes root

*Residents are creating an organic garden that they hope children and seniors will be able to enjoy for years.*

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As the last few drops of a morning rain shower hit the ground, Crystal Lecuyer and Cathy Raupp wheeled bags of soil to several shallow wooden boxes in the park behind the Middletown Community Center Saturday.

Lecuyer's son Markpaul, 6, and his friend Mackenzie Hochreiter, 7, grabbed hand shovels and started digging out holes for "pizza" plants: tomatoes, onions and peppers. Then they gave the still-dry soil a generous drink of water. Carefully, they nestled delicate green seedlings into their new home.

"Plant the tomatoes really deep. The roots should go down more," Cathy Raupp told them.

A Levittown resident, Raupp is a Penn State Master Gardener, a distinction she earned after training for eight months in Penn State University's Cooperative Extension community horticultural program. Lecuyer is a program specialist for the Middletown parks and recreation department.

With other area residents, they are leading the effort to create an organic community garden that seniors and children alike will be able to enjoy for years.

They hope to arrange gardening workshops on the community center site to teach residents various skills, including how to compost kitchen waste and how to make a rain barrel to catch falling rain.

Eventually, the vegetables and herbs the communities grow will be donated to local food banks.

"The seniors can help garden and weed, and children at summer camp can work on the garden," said Lecuyer.

Michelle Rubio of Middletown joined the group as the sun shone through the clouds. She said that local residents thought of the community gardening project. Rubio is on the town's Environmental Advisory Council.

The garden the group is working on is not conventional.

Inside artfully arranged wooden boxes, the bottommost layer is wet newspaper. Next is composted horse manure from a Bucks County farm, then pesticide-free grass clippings and finally leaves. Peat moss lies between each layer, and the top gets a coat of organic potting soil. The group found this "lasagna gardening" method in a book and decided it was a simple and elegant way to create an organic garden without having to dig deep into the ground.

Even the wood is chemicalfree, because it's not pressure treated to prevent decay. Eventually, it will have to be replaced, "but it's safer for the earth and the garden," said Raupp.

Bricks and wood that line the vegetable and herb gardens were donated by local people, said Lecuyer. Second-graders in the New Hope-Solebury School District coaxed the donated Burpee seeds to grow into young seedlings, and Middletown's Albert Schweitzer Elementary School children will help plant seedlings in the coming weeks.

The nation's on a green kick. First lady Michelle Obama is planting a White House vegetable garden of her own. So why not do it in lots of local communities, thinks Frank Schlupp, who just moved to Middletown from Northeast Philadelphia. He loves getting his hands dirty to beautify his neighborhood, and he's working on the Middletown garden while still volunteering with the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society in Philadelphia.

"I want to get a community garden started in Northeast Philly too," he said. "There's a lot of land up there but not a lot of gardening. This is just fun."