Gardening Angels spread wings over backyards and schoolyards

By GLENN COBLE
Messenger staff writer

The Athens County Community Food Initiatives has been awarded $39,500 seed money from the Ohio Environmental Education Fund for two projects.

The Gardening Angels project provides free plants to nearly 1,000 low-income and other residents. It also gives instruction about gardening and preparing vegetables for home use and market.

The goal is to help local low-income people and others provide food for themselves to save on their weekly grocery bill and to use more local produce.

The project also tills vegetable gardens for many families. This year about two-thirds of the tilled gardens were for low-income families.

The initiative has organized a free seed and tomato starts distribution as part of the Green Thumb free seed project, in conjunction with Rural Action and the Jackson Area Ministries. Over 5,000 vegetable starts were given out last season.

The Edible Schoolyard project will also benefit from the grant money. Last year was the pilot year, with three schools receiving assistance from the initiative. The three schools, West Elementary, River Valley Community School and Federal Hocking High School, were used to develop the project, with a goal of 10 local schools participating this year.

According to James Wynn, co-director of Community Food Initiatives, the Edible Schoolyard project will provide seeds, starts, tilling, curriculum materials and guest instructors for those 10 schools. The schools will provide the 400-square-foot plots for the garden and the students.

East and West Elementary Schools, River Valley Community School, Federal Hocking and the new alternative school in Stewart have been selected to participate this year, with the other five to be named later.

Wynn said lesson plans will be available for teachers. One is "Math in the Garden," in which students learn how many carrots will fit in a bag of a given size if they are one inch in diameter. "History in the Garden" lessons will teach why Native Americans planted corn, beans and squash together.

The curriculum will be available for students from third grade through high school.

The goal of this project according to Wynn is "to teach basic principles of ecology, basic food production and processing skills to the students."

This is the first year that the Edible Schoolyard project has been funded. The grant money will provide for the guest instructors, seeds, starts, curriculum materials, worm farm and composting bin construction and preparation of the garden plots at each school.

Community Food Initiatives, a nonprofit organization at 94 Columbus Road, operates primarily on grants and income from workshops and membership dues. People interested in the projects can call the organization at 592-3854.