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AgPark a growing success

SUNOL: Cooperative provides space for small business owners, nonprofit groups to grow produce

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Just miles from the hustle and bustle of urban life, there's a former hayfield at the Sunol watershed that has been reborn.

People there are growing organic produce for East Bay communities: tomatoes for school children's lunches; corn for Asian immigrants; zucchinis and pumpkins for needy families in Oakland.

It's called the Sunol Water Temple Agricultural Park, or Sunol AgPark, a cooperative farm where nonprofit groups and small business owners tend to gardens made possible through a partnership between the city of San Francisco SAGE, a and Berkeley nonprofit organization.

"I didn't know anything about farming before I started working for People's Grocery," Aswad Steel said as he pulled weeds from a small patch of summer squash. "I keep telling people, I wish this was around when I was in high school."

With its headquarters at the West Oakland YMCA, the People's Grocery promotes healthy eating by providing local schools with healthy snacks and selling bags of produce at wholesale prices, offering cooking classes and other programs. It has long had small gardens in Oakland, but the two acres it has acquired at Sunol AgPark has allowed it to expand its agricultural programs.

"People don't know how much chemicals they take in their bodies every day. Why spend the money on chemicals when you can eat much healthier," Steel said. "We're just trying to be helpful to our communities. That's what it's all about."

SAGE, or Sustainable Agriculture Education, joined with the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission to start the farm alongside the water temple in June.

It served both their goals, said SAGE director Sibella Kraus. SAGE was looking to launch its program to provide small farmers with affordable land (monthly rent is \$125 an acre) in urban-edge farms accessible to the public to provide an educational resource to the community. Meanwhile, the PUC was looking to provide a community benefit with the empty 18-acre lot.

The park recently hired an education coordinator who will host guests at the farm. This winter, they will plow the land under and cover it with a bean crop, to enrich the soil depleted by hay for next year, when the farm will start operating year-round. Other plans include planting riparian and native plants on the land's edge to restore its natural resources.

"It's going to be a working farm open to the public, teaching the public how it's done," said Jill Shepard, co-owner of Baia Nicchia, a fledging gourmet tomato business specializing in seedlings and breeding. "The educational component appealed to us."

Baia Nicchia is among the first four tenants -- three farmers and a Sunol beekeeper -- at the AgPark, where Shepard and her partner Fred Hempel grow their specialty tomatoes on a half-acre. They sell the seedlings at farmers markets and sell the fruits at low wholesale costs to the Hayward Unified School District, which uses them for pizza toppings and salad bars.

Next year, the couple will expand their crop to four acres and enter in exclusive partnerships with high-end restaurants.

"The AgPark is absolutely critical to growing the business," Hempel said. "One of the best things is

having (farm manager) Peter Rudnick out there. There's no way we could have jumped in the way we did this year without the expertise of a mentor farmer."

Kraus said SAGE is working to duplicate the Sunol park elsewhere in the Bay Area. It is in discussions with the Brentwood Agricultural Land Trust and surveying land in the Livermore Valley. Other potential sites include Napa and Santa Clara counties.

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