



Open Doors, Open Minds

Monmouth Reform Temple

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Pictured above are some of the MRT and community Gan Mazon volunteers who harvest their plantings of fresh vegetables bound for Monmouth County food pantries. They are: (left to right) Sue Malmi, Middletown; Gloria Gross, Lincroft, master gardener; Israel Mayk, Eatontown, master gardener Intern; David Levinsky, Morganville, master gardener; Lloyd Fitzsimmons, Middletown; and Denise Fredericks, Tinton Falls, master gardener.

PRESS RELEASE
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MRT’s Gan Mazon “Garden of Plenty” and Rutgers Master Gardeners Partner to Feed the Hungry

Tinton Falls: For twelve years now, precious garden space on the Monmouth Reform Temple (MRT) campus has produced and delivered thousands of pounds of fresh vegetables to local, non-sectarian pantries in Monmouth County. On a humid day in August, master gardeners and volunteers were busy, culling bright red tomatoes off the vines, weighing cucumbers and peppers, and sorting squash and beets for delivery to Jewish Family & Children’s Service of Greater Monmouth County (JFCS) in Asbury Park. Led by long-time temple member and past religious school principal David Levinsky, also a master gardener, volunteers meet every Thursday and other days as needed during the growing season.

“Gan Mazon,” which Levinsky explains, loosely translates into Hebrew as “Garden of Plenty,” was begun as a joint project between MRT and the Rutgers Master Gardeners of Monmouth County in 2009, then under the auspices of Master Gardener Howard Bodner. The actual garden took shape as an Eagle Scout project by MRT religious school graduate Josh Gilstein. Over the years, the garden has tripled in size to its current 3,000 square feet, improving production through crop rotation and succession planting. An impressive deer and small animal barrier fence to keep out Monmouth County’s ubiquitous fauna populations encloses the 110 feet x 27 feet x 8 feet plot. David Levinsky of Morganville took over the leadership of the garden in 2012 and was joined by fellow master gardener Gloria Gross a few years ago as co-director.

Unlike community gardens in which gardeners rent small plots at a nominal fee for their personal use, Gan Mazon donates 100% of its harvests to local non-sectarian pantries. Each season, volunteers replace spent nutrients with a layer of compost, block out weeds with layers of newspaper and mulch, place hundreds of vegetable plants or seeds in the garden’s soil, treat for insects and disease, and weed. On most Thursday’s they harvest, weigh and bag for delivery. Last season alone, 1,700 lbs. of fresh produce were delivered to the JFCS food pantry, with an additional 400 lbs. sent to the Open Door pantry in Freehold. An estimated 8,000 lbs. have been delivered since 2012 when Levinsky began keeping records.

Temple member and volunteer Lloyd Fitzsimmons comments, “I am happy to volunteer when I can and people come and go according to the time they can give, but David is the heart of the operation, never missing a planting or harvesting for all these years.”

The mission of the garden is “the core of what we do as Jews” according to MRT Rabbi Marc Kline. He adds, “The Book of Leviticus tells us to leave the corner of our fields for all who are hungry, the rich or the poor and to make sure we take care of the widow, the orphan and the stranger in order to secure life. If we are food insecure we cannot secure life.”

This year’s plantings included 10 varieties of tomatoes, five varieties of peppers and three varieties of squash as well as rhubarb, eggplant, and beets. An early spring harvest produced collard greens, kale and lettuce.

The healthy, organic vegetables are very much appreciated by JFCS Executive Director Paul Freedman who, according to David Levinsky, is very concerned in providing nutrient-rich, fresh, locally grown food for his agency’s clients.

David Levinsky comments, “We chose JFCS as our principal partner because no other donation garden provided its pantry with fresh produce. Paul had to purchase vegetables until we began this relationship.” The produce delivered to JFCS is supplemented by the agency’s purchase of other food staples and then distributed to 40 families every Friday afternoon. JFCS volunteers pack and label paper bags with their contents for each household.

While many of the volunteers come from the MRT family, numerous master gardeners chose Gan Mazon as the garden in which to earn their community service hours, a requirement for maintaining master gardener certification. Levinsky adds, “This is also a teaching garden, gladly sharing our knowledge and experience with people looking to start a garden or to improve their skills.

Gan Mazon has a meaningful role for anyone interested in providing fresh produce for families qualified for assistance. Please contact Mr. Levinsky at davidlevinsky@optonline.net. All are welcome.

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Below: (right) Gan Mazon Master Gardeners and volunteers harvest their bounty, weigh and package it for delivery to Monmouth County food pantries.

