

Newsday

Lilife

Rooted in faith

RELIGIOUS GROUPS'
GARDENS FEED MORE
THAN THE SOUL

E2



MARISOL DIAZ-GORDON

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In this issue

"Gardening has always been in my bones," says Sister Mary Lou Buser, right. That's a theme among those at three religious organizations on Long Island whose efforts to feed body and soul are profiled in today's cover story.

In Act 2, we share the stories of Long Islanders who find the spiritual side of creativity.

Meanwhile, today's Faith and Senior calendars continue to offer "virtual" events in which you can engage online.

This issue does not include the regular explore! Top 10 and Community Calendar; the Veterans calendar; or the Town Agenda and Police Beat. As we practice social distancing, many events and activities remain canceled.

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Long Island has its fair share of **inventors**. Even if you don't know their names, you probably know their products. **Check them out at** newsday.com/inventorsli

COVERSTORY

FEEDING the community

Religious groups use the harvests from their **gardens** to help others



Antony Ibarra helps harvest lettuce at St. Francis Episcopal Church in North Bellmore alongside his fiancé, Brother Chris McNabb, head of church there. ■ **Video:** newsday.com/LILife



ON THE COVER. Islamic Center of Long Island president Habeeb Ahmed tends flowers in a public space maintained by the mosque.



GARDEN DETECTIVE

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As the sun warmed the Big Boy tomato plants in the garden behind the Islamic Center of Long Island, Habeeb Ahmed leaned over to inspect a rogue vine. He wiped his brow as he secured the vine to a stake and continued weeding, watering and checking plants for pests. This labor of love wasn't simply to serve his own needs or put food on his own family's table.



NEWSDAY / STEVE POST



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Fresh eggs, above, destined for the Sisters of St. Joseph's "sharing table"; garlic and more harvested at St. Francis Episcopal.

Ahmed, a retired medical technologist, says his love for "playing in the dirt" began as a child who enjoyed growing flowers in his native Hyderabad, India. Nowadays, he is president of the mosque, where for 20 years, he has led a team

of volunteers who grow produce in a 15-by-40-foot garden on the center's Westbury property. For the past 12 years, they have been sharing their bounty with Long Island's food pantries and soup kitchens.

It's a scene repeated at

houses of worship and religious organizations across Long Island whose shared priorities of almsgiving and service have taken on greater urgency this year as unemploy-

See COVER STORY on E4



MARISOL DIAZ-GORDON

Sister Mary Lou Buser, who began the gardens at the Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood on her own, has seen the growing area gradually expand.

GET INVOLVED

Many religious organizations in Nassau and Suffolk are growing food to serve their communities. Some grow-to-give programs are underway, and others are hoping to bring on volunteers later in the season. If you would like to help, check with your local church, mosque, synagogue or temple, or reach out to one of these gardening coordinators.

- Bethany Presbyterian Church, 425 Maplewood Rd., Huntington Station: Chris Sellers, chris.c.sellers@gmail.com
- St. Francis Episcopal Church, 1692 Bellmore Ave., North

Bellmore: Skip Wade, 516-679-1184

- Huntington Jewish Center, 510 Park Ave., Huntington: Joanne Mulberg, jomulberg@gmail.com
- Islamic Center of Long Island, 835 Brush Hollow Rd., Westbury: Habeeb Ahmed, 516-581-5893
- Sisters of St. Joseph, 1725 Brentwood Rd., Brentwood: Heather Ganz-Bolkas, 631-838-0013
- St. Peter's by the Sea Episcopal Church, 500 South Country Rd., Bay Shore: Stephanie Campbell, 631-553-1342; stpetersbayshore.org

Fertile ground to help



COVER STORY from E2

ment and increased food insecurity gripped the region amid the coronavirus pandemic.

Brother Chris McNabb, head of church at St. Francis Episcopal Church in North Bellmore, meets weekly with the church's garden manager, Skip Wade, to make sure their 5,000-square-foot organic garden has what it needs. In early spring, the pair decided which vegetables to plant, this year opting for potatoes, squash, tomatoes, onions and garlic "because we don't know what the economy is going to do or when we'll be able to go out of our houses, so we wanted to be able to provide the basics that people need to feed their families," he said.

The church, which has donated nearly 10,000 pounds of produce in 10 years of running the garden, has been working with the Town of Hempstead to learn where help is most needed, Brother Chris said. "One of my top priorities this year is to ensure veterans get fresh food, in addition to those who need help to make ends meet."

His church arranged to be listed with the state Department of Agriculture's voucher program. When the harvests are ready, the church sells produce to its congregation and neighbors at its weekly farm stand on Sundays, and "we also have folks who come to exchange their vouchers," he said. "They get to pick what they like, and that's important because there is dignity in having a choice instead of having to take what's given to you." Unsold produce is donated to Soup to Nuts Soup Kitchen in Freeport.

'SHARING TABLE' IN BRENTWOOD

The Sisters of St. Joseph of Brentwood has been similarly supporting its community for roughly 15 years, if a bit more casually. Instead of a formal donation program, they set up a "sharing table" — a 6-foot round table where they place the bounty from the 22-acre campus. Community members can walk in and help themselves; the table is not manned, nor visitors tallied. One might

Brother Chris McNabb, head of St. Francis Episcopal Church in North Bellmore, says he is also the "chief waterer" in the church's garden.

Skip Wade, garden manager of St. Francis Episcopal Church in North Bellmore, worked with Brother Chris McNabb to determine what to plant for the season.





Habeeb Ahmed, center, president of the Islamic Center of Long Island, plants vegetables with other volunteers at the mosque in June.

DANIELLE SILVERMAN

PLANT A ROW FOR THE HUNGRY

Each year, GardenComm (formerly Garden Writers of America) asks garden communicators like me to spread word of their public service program, Plant a Row for the Hungry. As the pandemic lingers, and food insecurity grows for many of our neighbors, this year's initiative is arguably more important than ever. And it's easy to get involved.

Simply plant one extra row of produce and donate its harvest to your local food bank, soup kitchen or service organization. If you don't have room for an extra row, considering tucking in just an extra plant or two. Zucchini and string beans are especially productive.

Many plants also can be grown in containers. Lettuce and most herbs will thrive in pots just 4 to 5 inches deep; crops like bush beans and peas require a depth of 6 inches; pole beans, cucumbers, carrots, eggplants and peppers do well in 8 to 9 inches, and beets, potatoes, sweet corn and zucchinis can grow in pots 10 to 12 inches deep. Tomatoes grow best in 5-gallon buckets. (Don't forget to poke or drill drainage holes in pot bottoms.)

To find a collection site near you, visit the New York section of the directory at gardencomm.org/FindPAR-Committees.



Omar Sahar of Hempstead was among the volunteers in the garden at the Islamic Center of Long Island in Westbury last year.

MARISOL DIAZ-GORDON



Flowering plants — including 10,000 springtime tulips and daffodils — beautify the perimeter of the Islamic Center of Long Island.

DANIELLE SILVERMAN

find pumpkins, squash, beans, white and sweet potatoes, carrots, greens, brassicas or berries, depending on the day's harvest. In early summer, visitors are likely to find herbs, lettuce, arugula, kale and radishes. There are also eggs from the sisters' chickens and honey from their beehives.

"At the end of the day, what we put out in the morning is gone," said Sister Mary Lou

Buser, who planted the garden on her own in the late 1980s. "Gardening has always been in my bones," she said, crediting the so-called victory garden her family grew at her childhood summer home in Babylon during World War II. "I remember hopping along [with] my father as he planted those tomato seeds, and checking the plants every day, and I missed it when I entered the [reli-

gious] community, so wherever I lived, if they had a little patch, I always planted there."

Her priority was to care for the Earth, said the now-retired science teacher and physical therapist. So she saw to it that the gardens were organic. Soil health and pollinators were prioritized, and companion plants were used to discourage pests — all fledgling practices in those days. As the years

went on and helpers joined the effort, more beds were planted around the property, growing the ministry's programs. Today, the campus includes 21 free community garden plots made available on a first-come, first-served basis, as well as 22 acres designated for perpetual farming in a partnership with Peconic Land Trust. Those acres are leased to independent farmers, one of which,

Thera Farms, runs a farm stand at the property's entrance.

Every day, garden ministry manager Heather Ganz-Bolkas sees to it that a roster of chores is performed. "The chickens, goats and rabbits need to be fed and given fresh water, plants need to be watered, and there's always weeding and harvesting that has to be done.

"We have to turn the compost, and the flowers we plant for the pollinators need to be weeded, cut back, thinned. We have to get the sharing table ready: Rinse the vegetables and put them out," she said. "Then every day, there's little things that come up that you're not expecting. . . . Today we are expecting a storm, so we're extracting honey from the

See COVER STORY on E6

Gardens help fill the gap

MORE INFO

The Long Island Community Agriculture Network provides resources and assistance for starting a service garden. Visit lican.org for more information. To find a food pantry near you, visit 211longisland.communityos.org/zf/taxonomy/detail/id/525752.

COVER STORY from E4

beehive,” added Ganz-Bolkas, also the beekeeper.

MULTIGENERATIONAL GARDENERS

In addition to several types of tomatoes, the Islamic Center grows about 40 plants each of several other vegetables, including such ethnic specialty varieties as Japanese Ichiban eggplant and squash called cucuzza in Italy and kaddu on the Indian subcontinent. Ahmed constructed a pergola for the 4-foot-long gourds, which hang from it like baseball bats as they grow come August.

Nearly a dozen volunteers join him every morning at 7, planting, weeding, watering, fertilizing and harvesting for three hours before breakfast, which the center provides. Then it's back to work, often until 4 p.m. The multigenerational group includes retirees and Westbury High School students, as well as the mosque's leader, Imam Hafiz Ahmad, an avid gardener. Donations, supplemented by Ahmed's own money, pay for plants and supplies.

The volunteers, who have planted 10,000 tulips and daffodils, as well as other plants that bloom prolifically at the mosque, arrive as early as 5 a.m. during the height of summer to water hundreds of flowerpots that adorn the campus. New volunteers are welcome, and Ahmed stresses that anyone of any faith is invited. “After all, we are all human beings first and foremost,” he said.

Off-site, the center has adopted the once-neglected triangle at Jericho Turnpike and Powells Lane across from a 7-Eleven, cleared it of trash and weeds, and planted a garden that volunteers main-



Ali Bhutto was among the volunteers tending to gardens maintained by the Islamic Center of Long Island last year.



Breakfast is served to volunteers like Adam Zeb who turn out to work mornings at the Islamic Center's gardens in Westbury.

tain. “This is the entrance to our community, and it sends a message,” Ahmed said. Volunteers also can be seen, in yellow Islamic Center T-shirts, picking up trash along Brush Hollow Road.

Every Friday Sabbath, as

many as 700 members gather at tables outside the mosque where half the garden's bounty is shared among them. The other half is packed into boxes and baskets and delivered to the Mary Brennan INN, a soup kitchen in Hempstead that has

seen need triple over last year.

Previously, “we had regular sit-down meals, and on an average day, we would serve 300 to 375 people,” explained Deokie Santo, 64, who has worked at the INN for 16 years.

Because of the pandemic, all meals are now prepared to go, said Santo, whose job as administrative assistant includes preparing daily reports of the INN's food distribution. “We might have 300 people on line, but they tell us they have children, so they take home three or four meals,” she said, adding that the INN is happy to provide whatever is requested — and can, thanks to donations like those from the Islamic Center.

On a recent Friday, for instance, the INN provided 1,445 bagged or boxed meals, including soup made from donated produce, she said. “As much as we get, we give out to the people. It makes me so happy every day.”

GROWING DEMAND FOR PRODUCE

Anticipating more demand for food this year during the pandemic, St. Francis converted its children's garden into a vegetable patch, adding 1,200 square feet of growing space, Brother Chris said. “If you're hungry, you can go to a food pantry for canned foods, but those pantries have a hard time with fresh vegetables because they will be rotten before they can be distributed.”

Soup kitchens, however, can use and distribute fresh produce. “Nothing we get goes to waste,” said Marian Hart, Soup to Nuts' treasurer. “The garden's greens, cucumbers, carrots, squash, turnips, eggplant, tomatoes, okra, beans [and much more] have helped our cooks create more delicious, heart-healthy meals” over the years, added Hart, 77, with the soup kitchen since 1996.

In previous years, the kitchen typically served hot,



MARISSOL DIAZ-GORDON

Sisters of St. Joseph garden ministry manager Heather Ganz-Bolkas weeds the butterfly garden in Brentwood. She manages the daily roster of chores — and is the beekeeper.



Volunteer Aretha Campbell of Brooklyn prepares the soil last year in a garden on the Sisters of St. Joseph campus in Brentwood.

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multicourse lunches to roughly 75 guests every weekday. “Now we serve a take-home meal at the back door” for about 50 guests three times a week, she said. “In so many ways the garden at St. Francis epitomizes just how wondrous and

how wonderful it is that God feeds us through the earth.”

St. Francis provides 400 to 600 pounds of produce to Soup to Nuts during a typical growing season, thanks, in large part to its “fascinating group of volunteers,” the

brother said. They range “from some very faithful women who have been connected to the parish for years,” to Pastor Nancy Rakoczy from St. John’s Lutheran in Bellmore and high school kids, youth groups and social service groups from other churches. “And some folks just walk by and ask to help,” he added.

Brother Chris gets his own hands dirty, too. “I step in to weed, plant or whatever is needed, and I want to make sure the landscaping is productive and not just pretty,” he said. “Also, I’m the chief waterer.”

He also volunteers at The United Methodist Center’s soup kitchen in Far Rockaway, Queens. “We’ve never seen lines like we have now,” he said. “It’s completely overwhelming, the amount of people who are looking for food . . . and it’s given me the drive to make sure we have a good, strong garden available.”

WORKING TOGETHER, APART

Because the church sits on 2.3 acres, “we’re able to spread people out and have only one or two volunteers here at a time,” Brother Chris said.

“They bring their own masks, gloves and tools, which we encourage them to sanitize when they go home, and they are spread out across the garden to make sure no one is at risk for infection.”

Still, he notes there are fewer volunteers this year. They are managing, but “we are always looking for new volunteers,” he said, adding that when late-season crops mature, “we will have to turn them around pretty quickly so they don’t rot on the vine. So we’re hopeful that once we get COVID under control, it will align timewise with allowing more volunteers to return.”

Volunteers at the Islamic Center “wear masks all the time and try to stay six feet, if not more, apart,” Ahmed said. “Once in a blue moon, we may have to come a little closer if we need two people to pick up a pot, but we are very mindful about COVID-19.”

St. Joseph’s isn’t accepting new volunteers now, but those who are working in the gardens and caring for the animals are socially distancing, according to Ganz-Bolkas. “We’re outside, everyone is

staying at least six feet apart, and we’re all wearing masks.”

During ordinary times, Ganz-Bolkas would be spending time planning children’s and community programs, and coordinating school visits and group prayers for the change of seasons. But these are no ordinary times.

“My hope for this year lies in the day-to-day, being kind to this planet and tending to the life that is inhabiting this space,” she said. “I just hope that people can find that peace and respect for life, and have some good, nourishing food for their minds, bodies and souls.”

“The campus today is like a dream come true,” said Sister Mary Lou, who at 85 still works “a little” in the garden though says she has been “slowing down.”

Looking back, she said she never imagined the garden as it is today. “It makes me very happy to see people come to take what they need” and to have the opportunity “to use the community gardens and learn how to care for the Earth and how everything is interrelated,” she said. “That’s what it was all about from the very beginning.”