

# Garden in the Rough: OC Charity Adds Fresh Produce to Food Pantry

(John Fredricks/The Epoch Times)  
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Alan Smith walks down a row of plants at the Garden of Hope, located behind the Catholic Charities of Orange County in Santa Ana, Calif., on July 7, 2022. (John Fredricks/The Epoch Times)

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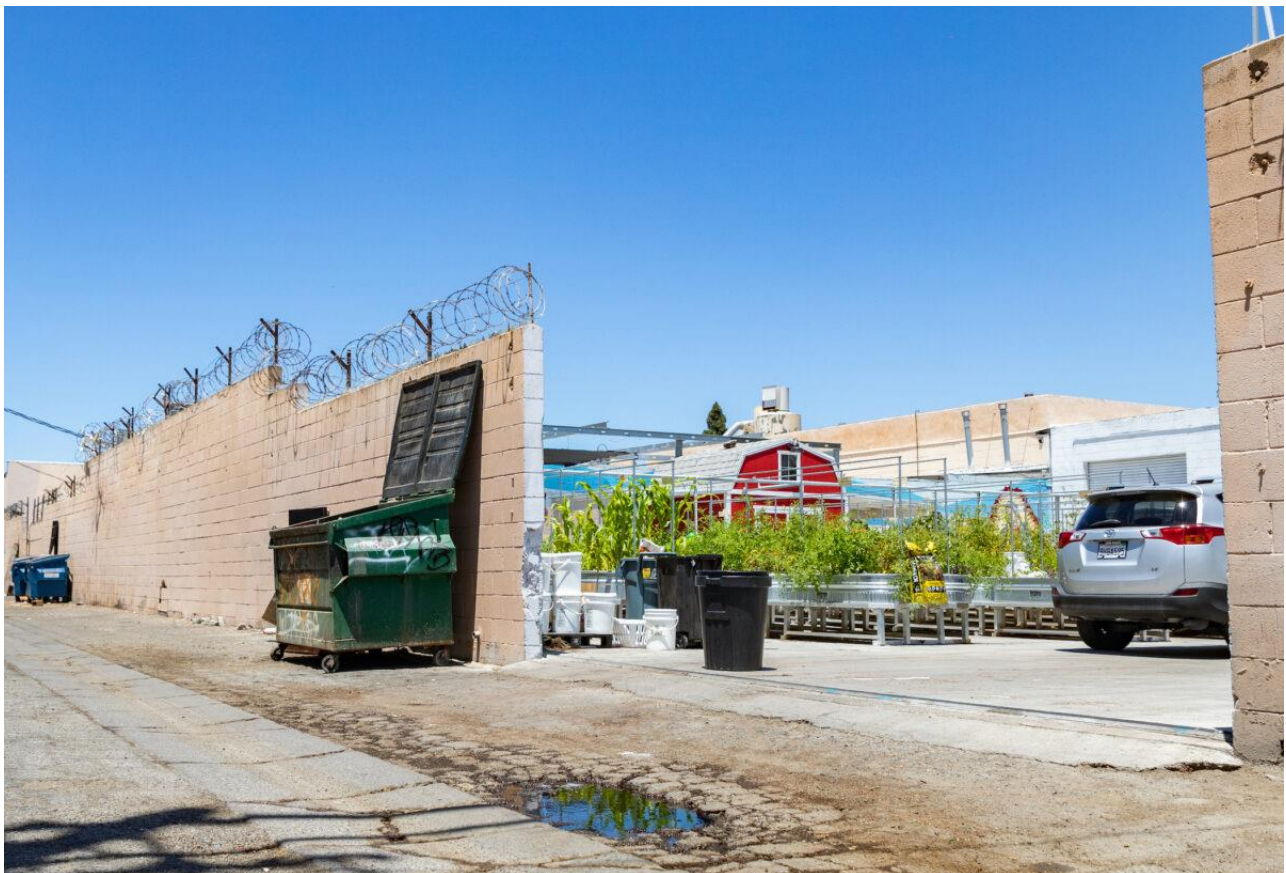
## Garden in the Rough: OC Charity Adds Fresh Produce to Food Pantry

By [John Fredricks](#)

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SANTA ANA, Calif.—In an alleyway strewn with litter and occasional graffiti, the dull colors of concrete and asphalt suddenly give way to lush greenery in the back lot of the [Catholic Charities of Orange County](#).

“I think when I came through that door, and I looked out here, the first thing I saw was concrete all around,” Alan Smith, 74, of Newport Beach, Calif., told The Epoch Times while pointing at the doorway to the Garden of Hope fruit and vegetable garden that produces food for the Catholic Charities’ food pantry ministry.



A woman walks down an alley outside of the Garden of Hope, located behind the Catholic Charities of [Orange County](#) in Santa Ana, Calif., on July 7, 2022. (John Fredricks/The Epoch Times)

“I just prayed at the door, and I thought, ‘Lord, you said I can do this,’ and he showed me the vision,” he said.

Smith, a former CEO and furniture designer, used his experience in contracting to help execute the project—which began a year and a half ago during the middle of the pandemic.

Rows of metal troughs of fruits and vegetables with overhead irrigation line the garden, next to a small red barn to store gardening equipment, and surrounded by walls of colorful murals painted by artist [Brian Peterson](#) that transform the back alley garden into a colorful, sustainable oasis.

“We’re composting all that stuff that we used to dump in the dumpster here in the, so we’ve made pretty good strides for the environment in the city of Santa Ana,” Smith said.

“Even the dirt that we take out of our garden goes to the City of Santa Ana to their community garden.”

Through generous financial and equipment donations, the metal troughs that were originally made for animal feed are now used to not only feed the community, but also teach them the process of gardening and farming.





A mural of Jesus Christ sits on the outer wall of the Garden of Hope, located behind the Catholic Charities of Orange County in Santa Ana, Calif., on July 7, 2022. (John Fredricks/The Epoch Times)

“We want to be able to educate people in the neighborhood how to do this in their own front yards,” the charity’s executive director, Ellen Roy, told The Epoch Times.

“The plan is to expand what we are doing here and really get the community on board with our long-term vision as an education center that not only teaches how to grow food, but also how prepare it.”

Working with the [CalFresh Healthy Living](#) program, Catholic Charities is planning on building a kitchen preparation area to show local students how to cultivate their own food and cook it.

“That’s our next fundraising effort: to get the kitchen in so we can start on our food demonstrations and really get our education program going,” Roy said.

“I haven’t run across anybody who’s focusing on how to teach those people to improve their lives by taking care of themselves, rather than just having to rely on, you know, a food bank. And I think [that] is the biggest difference that we have to offer as part of our mission, because problems are not solved until you teach people how to get out of their situation,” she said.

Roy noted that this concept is the heart of the mission of Catholic Charities—to teach and assist people to move up from the struggles they are facing.



(L to R) Ellen Roy, Joan Steen, and Alan Smith stand in the warehouse of the Catholic Charities of Orange County in Santa Ana, Calif., on July 7, 2022. (John Fredricks/The Epoch Times)

“This garden is really the first start of what we’re trying to do and to get it going,” Roy said. “The amount of food that we can generate here is relatively small compared to what is given away in total upfront, but if you tie this into the whole education aspect, you can’t replace that as people learn to grow and cook their own food.”

In front of the charity’s building, orange traffic cones were formed into a single lane to help direct cars towards the organization’s food distribution area, where families could receive a box of food to help relieve the costs of California’s inflation crisis and the rising cost of food.

The mid-week ministry and its volunteers and staff often encounter more than 700 cars daily. On Tuesday through Thursday, the food donations will now include fruits and vegetables grown in the Garden of Hope.



Alan Smith holds a fresh tomato at the Garden of Hope, located behind the Catholic Charities of Orange County in Santa Ana, Calif., on July 7, 2022. (John Fredricks/The Epoch Times)

“Our first round of planting last year [was] with a very wide variety of plants, but then we decided for the productivity of the garden that focusing on tomatoes as our largest crops would be a great idea,” volunteer and garden sponsor Joan Steen told The Epoch Times. “I mean tomatoes are prolific. You plant one plant, and you will get 100 tomatoes or more, and that’s more food for the community that we serve!”



Steen, who assisted Smith in the design process, has been volunteering at the garden since its beginning. Her love for gardening also went into the project as it slowly came into fruition.

“I just felt really strongly that this is a Catholic Charities facility and that it needs to have a cross, so the initial idea was to take the planters and put them in the shape,” Steen said.

To save space, Smith came up with the idea to construct a vertical hanging garden in the shape of a cross with over a dozen plants set near the wall of the entry area of the Garden of Hope.



A standing garden in the shape of a cross sits on the outer wall at the Garden of Hope, located behind the Catholic Charities of Orange County in Santa Ana, Calif., on July 7, 2022. (John Fredricks/The Epoch Times)

“Now it looks like how you would normally see the cross, and it goes with the idea that it reminds us of God’s blessing on our local garden,” Steen said.

“It’s amazing, and we look forward to the impact this could potentially make on the community,” she added.



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John Fredricks is a California-based journalist for The Epoch Times. His reportage and photojournalism features have been published in a variety of award-winning publications around the world.