

# Taking lessons from the Garden into the community

## Cultivating Plants, Enhancing Lives

Since its inception in 2006, the Moraine Township “Pantry Plants Garden Project” has provided freshly grown produce to 130 local families each summer. It thrives due to one ground-breaking concept, two talented and dedicated master gardeners who honed their skills at the Chicago Botanic Garden, and three municipal agencies working cooperatively together.

Sandra Washburn and Linda Mihel are neighbors, friends, and volunteers who coordinate and oversee the Pantry Plants Garden Project. After retiring from teaching high school, both women completed the University of Illinois Extension master gardener program at the Garden. They have spent much time volunteering at the Garden, but volunteer director Judy Cashen is excited to see them volunteering “beyond the Garden walls, and giving back to the community in a way that is extraordinary and meaningful.”

Their work ties in perfectly with the mission of the Garden: “We cultivate the power of plants to sustain and enrich life.”

While both Washburn and Mihel have been gardening all of their lives, the master gardening program offered at the Garden took their skill set to a whole new level. They credit the program for giving them a new appreciation of the artistry involved in gardening. “We received so much information, especially about the importance of native plants,” Mihel said.

The project is a joint venture involving Moraine Township, which serves residents in need within southeast Lake

County; the North Shore Health Center; and the Park District of Highland Park, which donates and tills the land in Woodridge Park. The garden consists of a large plot for growing produce for the pantry and 20 family plots. Since it began, the program has grown and improved and is generously supported by local businesses, nonprofits, and community members who donate plants, seeds, and time.

Washburn and Mihel lead the way. “They just keep giving and giving and giving,” Moraine Township Supervisor Anne Flanigan Bassi said. “Weeding, watering, harvesting—they do it all. It definitely wouldn’t be the garden it is without them.”

The garden’s bountiful harvest—bushels and bushels of various lettuces, broccoli, beans, tomatillos, kale, swiss chard, tomatoes, zucchini and more—provides healthy options not always affordable to food pantry clients and the participating families who opt to grow their produce from planting to harvest.

“Sandy and Linda make a real difference in the lives of our food pantry users, and we are grateful to the Chicago Botanic Garden for sharing these amazing volunteers,” said Bassi. “I am not sure we would be able to supplement our pantry with the quantities of fresh produce we offer without their help.”

*If you would like more information about the Pantry Plants Garden Project, contact Anne Flanigan Bassi at (847) 432-3240 or [super@morainetownship.org](mailto:super@morainetownship.org). Visit [chicagobotanic.org/school/mastergardener/](http://chicagobotanic.org/school/mastergardener/) for information about the master gardener program.*

*Volunteers extraordinaire Sandra Washburn (left) and Linda Mihel.*

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