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## New Community Gardens Get Ready to Bloom in Lafayette and Orinda

By *Sophie Braccini*



Father George, ready to start work at Saint John Orthodox Church Photo Sophie Braccini

"Ann Merideth, the Community Development Director, who staffs the Environmental Task Force, follows our progress and Niroop Srivatsa, the Planning & Building Services Manager, has helped us identify sites that could be appropriate."

One of the sites is located in front of the pumping plant across from the reservoir on Mt. Diablo Boulevard. "This site belongs to EBMUD and the agency has graciously offered the town to use it for free," says Thomas. This site has many positive attributes such as its central location, "some of us are excited at the prospect of transforming

Father George of Saint John the Evangelist Orthodox Church in Orinda has a dream; growing organic vegetables that could be given to the less fortunate of the Bay Area. Janet Thomas and the Eat Local Lafayette group have another dream; open a garden in Lafayette for community members to come and share in the abundance of the land. Both dreams are now taking shape; it just took a few little miracles and a lot of passion.

Fr. George designed his project with the help of many volunteers including Christopher Shein, who has been a Permaculture designer and gardener in the East Bay since 1993, and an instructor at Mills College. Permaculture is derived from the words permanent and agriculture; it's a method that creates sustainable agriculture that matches local ecosystems. The group put together a budget that was approved by the church at 501 Moraga Way.

"We are now ready to start bringing amendments and building the fence," said Fr. George. "We will be able to start our first summer crop in July." All the vegetables grown in the garden will be distributed to those in need. "We have two distribution centers -- a service that houses families who are homeless where we have volunteers, and another house in Berkeley for homeless men that we have a standing relation with," explained Orinda resident Dale Dallas, who has volunteered to be the garden project manager.

The Eat Local Lafayette group includes about 20 Lafayette residents, some currently involved with Lafayette's Environmental Task Force, some part of the community group Sustainable Lafayette and some just interested in local food issues. "The group is exploring the establishment of a community garden somewhere convenient within Lafayette where community members would be able to learn about sustainable gardening and share in the creation of a space where they could grow food," says Janet Thomas, who has been part of this effort since the beginning in 2008.

The group has met with Lafayette's Planning Department and determined what space in Lafayette might be available for use. "City staff has been very supportive," said Thomas,

the Old Tunnel Road site into a garden," adds Thomas, "it's close to a creek and contains many native plants." However the soil appears to need considerable improvement. Transforming it into a garden will require amendments and/or construction of raised beds.

Another site under review is located in Burton Valley and the main hurdle there is its off-center location. Where ever they end up, garden planners would like the patch to be semi-permanent. The group is aware as well of the financial challenges which come with providing water, electricity, fencing and garden beds and storage buildings for such a project, and is prepared to write grant proposals once a site is chosen and plans are drawn.

The same issues had to be overcome by the Orinda group. According to Fr. George, the dedication and generosity of about 10 early volunteers and the help of the church was invaluable. So far the group has raised half of its budget and is accepting donations in any denomination. "The cost of water is of concern," said the Father, "so we will be studying the possibility of digging a well that would guarantee our water independence."

A patch will be set-aside in the Orinda garden for the preschoolers who come daily so they can grow their own crops. "I've had parents approaching me asking if their teens could be involved in a community service project here, from growing the food to providing it to those in need," adds Fr. George.

"For those who are so inclined, gardening is an opportunity to integrate their love of God and the Creation with their spiritual practice," said Fr. George, and for those who are not so inclined, it's great fun."

Both groups welcome new volunteers. For the Lafayette garden, community members interested in participating in this project or have ideas for sites can email [localfood@sustainablelafayette.net](mailto:localfood@sustainablelafayette.net). For the garden at Orinda St John Church contact Dale Dallas at [daled7@comcast.net](mailto:daled7@comcast.net).

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