

Setting Up an Organic Vegetable Garden

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The Moraga Garden Farm is located south of the Moraga Ranch off Moraga Way

The next step is the building of four-foot-wide raised beds separated by two-foot-wide pathways.

“We practice flood irrigation for certain crops,” explained Rajan. Pathways are flooded between the raised beds where the plants are grown every two weeks. “This allows the water to saturate the bottom of the raised beds which encourages the plants to develop

deeper root systems.” The number one crop of the community farm for commercial sale is tomatoes. The farm cultivates nearly 850 plants, consisting of some 20 different varieties. The group gets seeds from the previous year’s harvest and buys new organic heirloom seeds every year to test what works best in Moraga. All plants are started from seeds in January in one of

the four green houses.

“We plant our tomatoes after the last frost, usually around mid-April,” Rajan said. Volunteers dig deep holes where one shovel-full of compost is thrown, with the addition of a handful of chicken manure. Water is added, and after mixing, the tomato is planted deep into the soil.

Rice straw is spread generously

around the plants as a mulch to retain moisture and to control the weeds. This also keeps the soil populations of worms and micro-organisms high. Since no herbicides are used, volunteers take charge of weeding when needed.

“Once the plants are at full height we stop watering,” Rajan said. “It gives the signal to the plant it is time to set and grow fruits.” The plants will be watered again if they start giving signs of over-stressing, such as leaves starting to curl.

To fight pests, the most efficient remedy Rajan has found is planting Marigolds at the end of each row of tomatoes. “They work as a natural bug repellent by attracting beneficial insects such as lady bugs,” he said. The same principals of using compost, mulch and quite a lot of manual work are also applied by Welch at Saint Mary’s.

The Legacy Garden was built and planted from scratch by the class of 2012, four years ago. “We used old bleachers to build our raised beds,” she explained. The hillside that was given for the garden is typical Moraga hard clay, the type that needs a lot of amendment to become fertile ground for veggies. Building the beds and adding organic dirt was the solution.

“We compost the vegetables left over from the campus’ restaurant, mixed with the leaves,” Welch said. “We also do worm composting.” Plenty of students provide the manpower to tend the college’s organic garden, and there are plenty of participants, too, when picnics are organized in the garden at harvest time. “We also provide a lot of greens to the campus salad bar,” she added.