

Feeding Laramie Valley expands program

By EVE NEWMAN / even@laramieboomerang.com | Posted: Thursday, February 5, 2015
12:00 am

A program intended to spread surplus produce around the community has found a way to keep the fruits and vegetables coming all winter long.

Feeding Laramie Valley is a nonprofit organization created in 2009. It collects fresh produce from gardeners during the growing season. It gives the produce to local groups such as the Laramie Soup Kitchen, Interfaith-Good Samaritan and Laramie Square Apartments, which offers housing for low-income seniors.

“We’ve been gathering together and sharing with people who do not have sufficient access to fresh produce, for a variety of reasons,” Founder Gayle Woodsum said.

The program has expanded every year, but it was always a sad day in the fall when volunteers packed up their coolers, Woodsum said.

“Every year, it felt really awful when we had to shut down the program because of our short growing season, and there were no more fresh fruits and vegetables being grown or available locally,” she said.

The program has been working to become a year-round operation, and this year, it took a big step, Woodsum said. Members used grant money to build high tunnels on several garden beds outside their headquarters at LaBonte Park, which will allow them to expand the growing season for their gardens. They also used grant money to purchase two indoor growing tents, which they’ll use to grow produce in the winter.

“Little by little, we’ve been moving in that direction,” Woodsum said.

The biggest step they took this year was to ask for donations and money to purchase produce. Feeding Laramie Valley doesn’t try to obtain produce that would otherwise be thrown out, Woodsum said.

“It’s always been about sharing the best of what’s available and what we can find,” she said.

Donated money is used to shop at local grocery stores. A box for donated produce sits at Big Hollow Food Co-op, where shoppers can drop off their own purchases.

Woodsum estimated about 50 people are donating, which allows Feeding Laramie Valley to reach several hundred local residents.

Each week, volunteers take produce to Laramie Square Apartments and the soup kitchen. Starting next week, another big tub of produce will head to Interfaith.

The organization had to start from scratch when envisioning a winter program because the philosophy of the summer program didn't translate well, Woodsum said. In the summer, program volunteers and employees man a table at both farmers' markets. Vendors donate unsold produce, shoppers buy extra and gardeners drop off their surplus.

"We're starting a whole new program and allowing it to proceed and develop organically just the way the first one did," Woodsum said.

Lina Dunning, who works on special projects for Feeding Laramie Valley, said taking food around town is an uplifting experience. At Laramie Square Apartments, for example, residents usually linger to swap recipes and share food-inspired memories.

"It's been very touching, interesting and informing kind of relationship," she said. "It feels really good to be a part of it."

Residents often swap food around and share their own surplus items. Woodsum said give and take is shaping the program's personality.

"We're all in this together," she said.

Feeding Laramie Valley's indoor gardens — planted with greens, potatoes, carrots and tomatoes, among other crops — could be ready for harvest as soon as late March. Woodsum said she's hoping donations last at least until then, if not longer. Outdoor gardens in the Laramie area aren't ready for harvest until well into summer.

"I'm starting to believe the support is going to continue to come and we can keep doing it until the fresh produce is available at the end of June," she said.

The coming year could be a big one for the organization, Woodsum said.

"We're really working hard behind the scenes on multiple major projects to help make Feeding Laramie Valley sustainable for a long time to come," she said.

Volunteers are always welcome to garden, sort and pack produce and make deliveries.

How to get involved

Feeding Laramie Valley is an organization that works to provide fresh produce to residents who can't afford it. The organization is providing produce this winter with the help of donations. Volunteers are needed to garden, sort and pack produce and make deliveries. Go to www.feedinglaramievalley.org for more information.