

A harvest of goodwill in Talent

By Claire Krulikowski
For the Daily Tidings

Notes left on the front yard table offer a hint of the gratitude and good feelings people hold toward the occupants of the house on Talent Avenue.

"God bless you for giving us food every year," says one.

"Thanks for trusting people," says another.

For more than 20 years, Dave and Colleen Russell have been offering a bounty of garden produce harvested from their three acre "garden" at a nominal amount on the honor system. Imagine 50 cents for zucchini or squash almost the size of a forearm. Dave's prize corn receives accolades.

The assortment varies, including tomatoes, cucumber, beans, spinach, seasonal treats like pumpkins or winter squash - whatever's ready on the cycled planting system they've set up - plus "gift items" like herbed vinegar and potpourri.

No one sits in the shade of the trees collecting money. Instead, visitors select their vegetables and leave payment in a cashbox. The Russell's never know how many visitors come by.

"There are lots of low-income people in our area," says Colleen. "Here there's inexpensive, nutritious food, so we're meeting the needs of the community."

The couple also donates food to Medford's Gospel Mission. Colleen says that checks left in the cashbox demonstrate their produce is also an appreciated "find" for folks from places including Ashland and Klamath Falls seeking fresh, local vegetables grown without artificial chemicals (the Russell garden isn't officially certified as "organic").

Dave says, "It's fun to watch people enjoy it, to see people happy. I also like the 'atta boy' compliments my garden experimenting brings."

Maintaining a Life Style

Ironically, when Colleen and Dave married in 1977, Dave didn't eat vegetables, and Colleen forced him to as an example for their children. Back then the acreage hosted cattle.

Growing tomatoes for fresh pizza sauce, Dave sold any extra tomatoes. They gave up cattle completely "10 or 12 years ago to concentrate on produce. And because you don't have to chase corn," Dave says.

A workman suggested they sell the corn, and soon Dave's passing interest in produce became his passion. The couple even had a "U-Pick Beans" set-up in the field for several years, until Colleen "watched some extremely elderly women walking with canes in the field trying to pick beans."

She told Dave "we have to bring the food out front and make it easier."

Proceeds from sales are meant to help pay their property taxes, though they aren't sure it always does.

This year they've faced a surprise challenge: theft. More than \$50 in gift items were taken one night. Quantities of produce and cash began disappearing, too. Posting a sign notifying people of the thefts has elicited concern such as that expressed in this note found on their produce table:

"I am putting in a little extra. Have faith. There are still good people willing to help others. God Bless you."

The Russells say notes such as these make it worth the continued effort, demonstrating the reciprocal circle of care and giving.

Rural Holdout

Talent's "building boom" is closing in around them, so the Russell's must reassure visitors they've no plans to sell their property to developers.

"We're a rural hold-out in an urban setting," explains Dave, who says that this farmland has existed since 1920. "It's a natural habitat for pheasants, quail, and other animals."

Yet, resigned to area growth, the couple is looking forward to the company. "Doing this has been a great way to get to know people we never would have."

Regarding goals, Dave says he wants "to do something with the land that's beneficial, that's noble, something that's good for our neighbors. I want to see how much I can produce out of these three acres, to discover how a person can take a small space and produce food for their family and extended family."