

Neighbors Helping Neighbors
How Gardeners Can Help!
By Tina Sarantos, MGC District 3B Treasurer

Michigan Garden Clubs initiative Gardening with Purpose combines “the joy of growing with the simple act of giving - helping provide fresh, healthy food to neighbors in need”. Recently I spoke to Barb Smith, the Director of FISH of Grand Blanc, a food pantry with a mission that aligns with the MGC Gardening with Purpose Initiative. Barb is a veteran of the Navy who leads the team of volunteers at FISH. The mission of FISH is “Neighbor Feeding Neighbor”, serving people experiencing food insecurities living in the Grand Blanc School District. The school district has 8,000+ children. The children in need face a wide range of circumstances, from those who are members of large families struggling to obtain enough food to individual children living with a single parent who is out of work. Without judgement FISH feeds their neighbors in need. The work at FISH is necessary and gardeners can help with their mission by dropping off canned goods as well as fresh fruits and vegetables. The easiest fruit and vegetables to distribute include cucumbers, celery, peaches and apples. Below is what I learned from my conversation with Barb.

Q: “Who qualifies to receive food at your facility”?

We don't turn anyone away. We do not ask for a proof of income or financial review. If they come, we will feed them - it's free will. We feed whole families as well as seniors and singles. If someone comes to us who doesn't live in the district, we will give them what we call a “grace” package with food and information about how to find food where they live. Unfortunately, many smaller pantries in the surrounding area are closing.

About ⅓ of the student population in Grand Blanc benefit from receiving food from the pantry, and the volume is expected to grow closer to 50%. Some children are living in very difficult situations, sleeping on floors. There are seniors living in buildings that are crumbling. FISH is where the greatest in need can come and get food. Many of the people served live less than a mile away.

We reach out to veteran organizations as well, engaging with local veteran's resources and providing seasonal gift packages to veterans.

Q: How do you manage the operation?

There are 50-70 volunteers who dedicate their time and work as a team to distribute the food. In addition to distributing the food at our facility, there are volunteers who deliver food to approximately 100 people who cannot drive. The reasons people can't get to the food pantry range from being seniors who no longer drive or adults who can drive but don't have the money to pay for license plate tags.

College students from Grand Blanc college also volunteer from Grand Blanc.

Q: How much space do you use and what are your plans for the future?

We have 3200 square feet of space as well as an additional 2700 where the inventory is kept. That space includes 2 coolers and 3 freezers. We want to purchase another freezer but until then we will continue to work with a school down the road who has a walk-in cooler and freezer that's used for overflow.

We collected bottles and cans in addition to raising donations to replace the roof which we are doing this summer and because of the growing need we are planning to build an addition. God will be there with us and we will be able to grow to meet the need.

Q: Do you have any special programs you'd like to highlight?

We worked closely with a volunteer whose parents were in the concentration camps during World War II. He leads the effort to coordinate delivery of the school hot lunches that didn't sell during the day. Those lunches are put in containers so that FISH can hand them out. This eliminates the food waste that was happening at the schools.

Once we have the addition built, we will have the space to teach people how to use the food we give them to make more substantial meals. For example, if we give them a package that has a can of beef stew, plus some fresh tomatoes and a bag of rice, we can teach them how to cook the rice, add the tomatoes and the can of beef stew; expanding the meal.

We want to put meal packages together along with recipes so people can learn how to maximize the food that's given. A volunteer is needed to chair this new program. Someone to chair packing a meal in a bag with the recipes.

In addition to food, there are 1800 children who receive clothes donations.

Q: What are the food items that have the greatest benefit to those in need?

Meals like chili or SpaghettiOs, beef stews, especially for kids and veterans/seniors. It's a meal in a can and kids will eat a can of SpaghettiOs but for seniors, two people will split a can. Tomato soup is popular but how long will that last so now you take the tomato soup and you add it to the chili and add fresh tomatoes and rice and it goes so much further.

Q: When and where can people drop off donations?

Drop off anytime we are open or drop off at the front door in the morning before we open. We hand out food Monday, Wednesday, Friday, Saturday. Fresh produce is distributed quickly.

Q: What are the easiest fruits and vegetables for you to keep and distribute?

Tomatoes, green beans, celery, cucumbers, apples, peaches. If a large volume is delivered, we have volunteers who will cook and can the vegetables, or for example, we

have a large family who will take the apples that are about to turn and make apple sauce to can for their own use.

I'd like to see more fruits and vegetables than what we see now. If we get a very large quantity donated, we can use a truck to distribute to people. We recently served 591 people 50 cases of cherry tomatoes via a drop off truck.

Berries aren't helpful because they come in quarts and are difficult to break down into smaller servings for distribution and because they perish quickly.

FISH is a vital link to those with food insecurity and gardeners can help by dropping off those extra vegetables from their garden, or a u-pick outing. Your efforts will have an immediate impact. Also, there are always opportunities to volunteer, whether at the pantry location, by participating in the delivery program or deciding to lead a new program.

FISH of Grand Blanc is located at 5131 S. Saginaw St. in Grand Blanc, MI. (810) 515-1978

To learn more about FISH and to find opportunities to help, go to

<https://www.facebook.com/FISHOFGB/https://www.gbcs.org/community/grand-blanc-fish>