



Frances Gould Naftal and her husband, Marvin, own a farm in Sussex County, raising animals along with fruits and vegetables. Longtime financial supporters of Project Self-Sufficiency, a local non-profit agency which specializes in services for low-income families, the couple were mulling over alternative ways to help the participants served by the non-profit agency. “One day it hit me,” remembers Frances. “I thought Project Self-Sufficiency should have a garden. I feel very serious about food and food systems. People should be growing some of their own food and it should be a part of our culture. It’s vital that people have access to fresh food because it makes people healthier.”

Coincidentally, the agency’s Board of Directors had been grappling with the issue of providing fresh, locally-grown produce to their participants for years. While Project Self-Sufficiency has a food pantry for participants, fresh produce was not donated consistently and there was no system in place for educating participants and their children about using fresh fruits and vegetables in meal planning. With the agency’s recent move to a 5-acre campus in Newton, the issue appeared to resolve itself. Why not start with the children in the agency’s childcare center? Build a large garden behind the Little Sprouts Early Learning Center and involve the children in the planting, care and harvesting of fresh fruits and vegetables.

So Frances hired a back hoe one day last spring and the garden was born. Much of the summer months were spent installing fencing and raised beds for planting. Some produce was harvested and the education program began to gather steam. Fast forward to Spring of 2012, and the agency was once again faced with the challenge of caring for such a large parcel of land. At the same time, Erin Shroll and Lisa Kelly, coordinators of [Harmony Starts](#), a local organization which grows organic plants from seedlings, were searching for a project that would involve their volunteers. Erin is a Master Horticulturalist and Lisa is a marketing specialist involved with local organizations such as the Foodshed Alliance and Genesis Farms. Harmony Starts donated vegetable seedlings to fill six raised beds with cucumbers, broccoli, kale, tomatoes, beans and other plants.

Project Self-Sufficiency Treasurer Rhoda Seider gathered a team of volunteers made up of agency supporters, local gardeners and friends of Harmony Starts, including Mary Spector, Pat Wilson, Chuck Mathia, Laura Quigley, and Elysia Ochs. Throughout the spring and summer months the team has met weekly and

together they have mulched, watered, weeded and created a bountiful garden. “The spirit of the committee and the enthusiasm of the idea of providing homegrown vegetables to our participants was such a lift for us,” noted Rhoda Seider. “It’s bringing a smile to everyone’s face.” Produce is harvested daily and offered to agency participants as they enter the lobby at Project Self-Sufficiency. Baskets are provided for families to cart produce home and share with their children.

“Getting fresh food to low-income families in our area is a constant challenge, yet we live in an area of New Jersey renowned for its lush farmland and the fresh produce available at local markets,” remarked Deborah Berry-Toon, Executive Director of Project Self-Sufficiency. “We are humbled by the efforts of all of the volunteers who have come together to help to address the issue of hunger in our community in a meaningful, long-lasting way. They have helped to break the cycle of poverty by not only providing food to these families, but educating them about the importance of fresh fruits and vegetables as part of a daily diet.”

The garden project at Project Self-Sufficiency has been a successful venture, and Frances Gould Naftal would like to see other community gardens popping up throughout the area. “We are doing our best to get the food into the pantry. Project Self-Sufficiency does a wonderful job. They serve the community that needs it. When you see a little child pulling carrots out of the ground and realize that they know where their food comes from, it’s really kind of a miracle.”



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