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Huge Community Effort to Feed 10,000 People

By Sophie Braccini



Siamack Sioshansi gives instructions to the volunteers

Photos Sophie Braccini

A small army of volunteers, many from Lamorinda, gathered at the property of Charlotte Sturgeon in Vacaville Nov. 16 at the urging of the local non-profit organization Urban Farmers to pick as much as possible of the thousands of pounds of persimmons that would otherwise go to waste. This new challenge taken on by the all-volunteer group seemed daunting at first, but founder Siamack Sioshansi cannot stand wasting fresh vegetables and fruit when so many people are hungry. He and his core volunteers made the impossible happen in just two weeks: they created the infrastructure and gathered the volunteers to harvest and distribute 50,000 pounds of fresh fruit to those in need.

"(On Oct. 31) I received a call from the Food Bank of Contra Costa and Solano County introducing me to a widow who lives in Vacaville," said Sioshansi. "She explained that her late husband planted 812 persimmon trees and shortly after the planting, he passed. Her orchard has now matured and since she is not a farmer, she does not know what to do with all the fruit. Last year over 100,000 pounds of fruit rotted on the trees. This year, she wants to donate the fruit to the needy."

A few years ago, Sioshansi founded the Urban Farmers, an all volunteer Lafayette-based non-profit with a mission that evolved from helping suburbanites grow their own food to gleaning the thousands of pounds of fruit that is wasted every year by people who grow more than they need.

"The annual Thanksgiving feast is a reminder of how fortunate my family has been, and when I think of helping the hungry, I try to find a better option than donating cans of soup," said Sioshansi. "One can of soup or six pounds of fresh, tree-ripened fruit? If you were poor, which one would you pick?"

Last Saturday morning, the trees in the Vacaville orchard seemed to be begging to be picked, many branches

weighted down to the ground with ripe, juicy, bright orange persimmons. The volunteers came from all over the Bay Area, from San Francisco to Sacramento to San Ramon, with probably the largest contingent arriving in two buses filled with Saint Mary's College students. Those familiar with persimmon trees came with cutters and gloves; the students just made it work by twisting the firm fruit a few times.

Sturgeon was pleased. "My late husband was his own man and he had all these business ideas," she said. "I don't know why he planted all these trees, but if he can see us this morning, he must be very happy."

Tina Pars, of Orinda, was one of the many volunteers who worked in pairs, endlessly dropping persimmons into milk crates before transferring them to larger crates provided by the food bank. They were then taken by a small pick-up to the larger Loaves and Fishes trucks, which began to fill very quickly. "I just love persimmons," said Pars. "I just bite into them like in an apple, or sometimes I cut them in thin slices and eat them with Brie."

Other organizations helped with technical aspects of the harvest. Moraga Hardware and Lumber owner Bill Snider donated 100 picking poles and Charter Pro, a local transportation company, offered the use of its buses. In addition to the 100 Saint Mary's volunteers, Diablo Valley College recruited 50 helpers, UC Davis sent 100 people and The Athenian School, which has an orchard of 125 fruit trees that are harvested for donation, sent a busload of students and parents.

"The volunteers from the local churches came to serve lunch to the working volunteers, and the list goes on," said Sioshansi.

The volunteers stopped picking around 3 p.m. when the 50,000 pound objective was reached. "That's all the Food Bank could take," said Sioshansi. The fruit, which preserves well in cool, dry conditions, will be

distributed over the next weeks to hungry families around the East Bay.

For more information about Urban Farmers, visit www.theurbanfarmers.org.

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Volunteers pick persimmons.

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