

Off-the-grid community initiative yields a rich harvest

The garden at Oliver's Village - named after Charles Dickens' famous character Oliver Twist - has boosted this non-profit organisation's capacity to spread hope in the Zenzele community in Daveyton.

Although one garden, it consists of three parts namely an educational section tended to by preschoolers, a productive garden run by a group of volunteers and a fruit forest, consisting of 200 trees. It produces tomatoes, peppers, cabbage and an array of other vegetables and fruit.

Oliver's Village - a non-profit organisation - is situated on more than four hectares in Putfontein and the initiatives offered there include a soup kitchen, early childhood development centre, a learning centre where high school students get extra maths and physics lessons, a computer training centre and of course the food garden.

"The garden work develops our preschoolers' fine motor skills, stimulates their senses and most importantly teaches them to share. Not only do they have to share the garden tools, but they also, as young as they are - share the produce with their community," says Michelle da Costa, administrator of Oliver's Village.

The educational garden was planted just under a year ago with the help of seedlings from Checkers' Little Garden promotion. The community garden project had by then been abandoned after several failed attempts to get it going. The food forest had also been planted by then.

Checkers and its implementation partner, Food and Trees for Africa, assessed the garden and found it ideal for support in the form of permaculture training and the provision of seedlings and gardening tools.

"We sell the produce of high quality to the Zenzele community. The bulk of the produce, however, gets used to feed the more than 400 people - preschoolers, high school students, volunteers and other community members - accessing services from Oliver's Village."

A recent bumper harvest yielded 137 kg of butternut, 70 kg of tomatoes 40 kg of beetroot and 4 kg of green pepper. "In a case like this, where there's a lot of surplus produce, we give away the vegetables to community members," explains Da Costa.

The garden is part of the plan for Oliver's Village to one day be financially self-sufficient. "We're keen to start producing enough vegetables and fruit to provide a stable income for us. Checkers' role in helping us establish the garden could not have come at a better time."

A unique feature of the village, which is in line with its aim to be self-sufficient, is that it operates totally off the grid. A photovoltaic power station generates its electricity. Ground- and rainwater is harvested for use in the garden. Biogas is produced from sewage, garden waste, manure and other organic materials. No municipal sewage services are used either,

they use dry sanitation toilets, that don't require plumbing, while waste from the ECD centre is channeled to the biogas digester.

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CAPTION: Thandeka Machanga (left) and Michelle da Costa with preschoolers from Oliver's Village tending to their garden.