

Backyard harvest helps hungry; Volunteers pick and process fruit that would otherwise go to waste; [Final Edition]

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There's a cornucopia of ripening fruit just aching to be picked in backyards and back 40s around the capital region.

The sad thing is that much of it simply dies on the vine, a fact that led to the creation of the Fruit Tree Project, run in conjunction with LifeCycles -- a non-profit group promoting awareness of food, health and sustainability issues. The idea is to round up homeowners willing to allow volunteers onto their property to harvest the fruit, a portion of which is donated to food banks and community organizations.

Prime picking months for project volunteers are July through October. Right now, pickers are on to transparent apples in particular, and starting this week will be looking for a run of golden plums.

The different types of fruit around Greater Victoria reach their prime stage of ripeness in fairly rapid succession, so co-ordinator Renate Nahser-Ringer has to constantly update the picking schedule.

Last year's take by the picking brigade was 7,260 kilograms of fruit, most of which would have rotted away otherwise. Cherries, pears, plums, apples, grapes, figs and kiwi form just a partial list of what filled the project's larder. Add to that one of the lesser-known stars from the 2006 harvest, the quince -- a yellow, apple-like fruit of Asian origin that is popular in jellies and other preserves.

Vegetables are also gathered from time to time.

Nahser-Ringer said a lot of progress has been made since the project began in the late '90s. The concept has gathered considerable support over the years from homeowners, and now is gaining a boost from businesses that find ways to process the fruit.

"It's one of those things where it's a win-win-win all the way around. This is a way that the fruit can be used in the community and it helps local businesses, and we're a major supplier for the food banks in the summer."

One of the main reasons fruit trees are plentiful around Greater Victoria is its past glory as a fruit-producing region through much of the 19th century, Nahser-Ringer said. Many of the trees that flourish in yards throughout the city's neighbourhoods can be traced to long-ago orchards from that period.

Nahser-Ringer, whose 21-year-old son, Erich, is helping her with her duties this summer, said the Fruit Tree Project is thriving, but can always use more involvement.

"We could use more pickers, and we can use more fruit. And we're looking for socially minded business associations."

About 50 volunteers are already in the fold.

In recent years, the project has teamed with Truffles Catering to make quince paste, with SeaCider to make apple cider, with **Spinnakers Brew Pub** to make apple-cider vinegar, and with Shady Creek Ice Cream to make various products. This year, there's a plan to work with Feys and Hobbs Catered Arts on a fruit sauce made from plums.

Nahser-Ringer said other efforts to engage the community include a canning workshop for seniors, while government ministries and other employee groups chip in from time to time by offering their services for "team picks."

At a recent picking session, homeowner Shirley Hinch of Saanich said she was happy to have project volunteers come by for the fruit in her yard. With plums, pears and apples, there is more than enough fruit for her needs, she said.

"I can't keep up with all the picking because usually they're all ready at the same time."

She said the Fruit Tree Project is a common-sense solution.

"I think it's great."

Call the Fruit Tree Project hotline at 89-FRUIT (893-7848).

On the net: lifecyclesproject.ca

VolleyPalooza comes to Esquimalt's Bullen Park on Saturday in support of the pediatric department at Victoria General Hospital.

The outdoor volleyball tournament, organized by Roz Eckardt, brings together local volleyball leagues, businesses, VGH staff and the Victoria Hospitals Foundation to raise money for children's health care. Players of all ages and skill levels are welcome to play. Cost is \$25 per player for registrations received by Friday, or \$30 on the day of the event.

Go to www.volleypalooza for registration details, or call 589- 9966.