

Yes, there is a free lunch

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The Observer

You don't get an offer like this every day.

Volunteers with the One Tomato Project are giving away fresh produce straight out of their new downtown garden.

That's right, free.

"We want everyone to help themselves. If you are having trouble buying fresh vegetables on your budget, take some. If you just want a snack, pick a tomato or a cucumber," said Darren Hakker, co-founder of the One Tomato Project.

He and Megan O'Neil started the program three years ago to "reconnect" people with fresh produce.

They encourage local residents and business owners to grow a tomato — or any veggie — in their garden. There are now dozens of gardens in operation, and it doesn't matter how big or small the effort, it will contribute to local food production, said Hakker.

"If you grow one tomato and eat it yourself, that's great. If you grow a lot and have some to give away, we encourage you to give it to a food bank."

Hakker and O'Neil said Sarnians latched onto their idea and it took off.

The city grew fresh produce in one of its downtown planters the first year, while people started small gardens in their yards and bigger ones at their workplaces.

Last year, a community garden was planted beside the downtown library that proved a big hit with homeless people who regu-

larly helped themselves.

Now, The Inn of the Good Shepherd is receiving regular donations of fresh produce.

Hakker and O'Neil decided the "test" garden at the library was such a success they wanted to establish a larger community garden this year.

A woman who owns a narrow strip of land at Davis and Front streets agreed to let the One Tomato Project convert it into a garden, large enough to grow beans, cucumbers, lettuce, swiss chard, onions, celery, corn, peppers and, of course, tomatoes.

"We were grateful for the land but found it had the worst soil we'd ever seen," Hakker said.

A group of volunteers dug down a foot, applied mulch and a layer of cardboard, then created raised beds using compost.

There's no water source so the project scouted around for large barrels and found a few volunteers to help keep them full.

"It's highly visible and very accessible in an area where there is no grocery store," said O'Neil, who works downtown. "We want people to take what they want."

Despite years of planting, growing and handing out seedlings, One Tomato volunteers have experienced no vandalism, Hakker added.

"We see that people will party near the gardens or make themselves a salad, but they don't damage anything."

The concept is supported by donations from the Sarnia Community Foundation and SunLife Financial, as well as many in-kind contributions. This year, the program will cost about \$8,000.



Darren Hakker, Megan O'Neil and Grace Minielly pick vegetables in the One Tomato Project's new community garden at the corner of