

Green thumbs wanted, not sticky fingers

Thefts spur precautions at local community gardens to safeguard produce

By KEVIN COLE

WORLD-HERALD STAFF WRITER

When two Omaha neighborhood gardens were stripped of hundreds of plants, organizers of some area gardens began looking for ways to give potential thieves a tougher row to hoe.

Last month, thieves took \$1,000 worth of plants before they could be put in the ground from the Orchard Hill Garden near 40th and Seward Streets. A few days earlier, 50 to 75 vegetable plants were uprooted from the Sherman Community Center's Youth Garden near 16th Street and Hartman Avenue.

"We heard that awful news of two other gardens being hit and kind of reviewed our situation," said Kurt Goetzinger of the Benson Community Garden. "One of the best things we have going is (the garden) is very visible on a corner lot."

Community gardens vary widely in size but most allow gardeners to rent a plot and then share the costs of equipment, water and overall improvements. The gardens usually have picnic tables or benches for social outings and distribution of free produce.

Mary Balluff of the Douglas County Health Department said some of the ways to avoid theft are to speak with neighbors about the goals of the garden, post signs asking for respect of the property, create growing spaces in high traffic locations, increase security lighting and arrange to share produce.

Stephanie Alschwede at Big Garden, a consortium of 75 community efforts in Nebraska and Kansas, said another way to protect gardens is to include children. She said children at play during the summer become "the eyes and ears of the neighborhood."

At the Benson Community Garden near 60th Street and Lafayette Avenue, Goetzinger said organizers have adopted most all of the recommended practices for security. The garden, in its second year, is home to 36 family plots within a three-rail fence.

"The two steps I would really recommend everyone do is to distribute flyers to your neighbors explaining how the

See Gardens: Page 2



KENT SIEVERS/THE WORLD-H

At the Benson Community Garden, 60th Street and Lafayette Avenue, Vanessa Dobles tends her plot in the high-visibility garden on a corner lot. In an effort to discourage thieves, a "neighbor garden" has been created outside the fence from which anyone may take produce — but bells are attached to the tomato cages that are tied together with zip strips to discourage the theft of entire plants.



Gardens: Neighbors' eyes peeled

Continued from Page 1

garden is organized and asking them to watch for vandalism," Goetzinger said. "The other thing we've done is plant what we call a 'neighbor garden' outside our fence, with the produce available to anyone for the taking."

The 40 tomato cages in the 4-foot-by-75-foot neighbor garden are tied together with zip strips and twine to prevent theft, he said. Bells also are attached to the cages in hopes their ringing will deter thieves.

"If a thief were to try to yank out one cage, he would have to grab them all because they're tied together," said Goetzinger, who lives next to the garden. "Once they see the zip strips, they aren't going to try to rip us off. It would be too much

trouble."

In their third growing season, the Hands to Harvest garden organizers hope to deter some of the random thefts of produce that have plagued them by posting signs explaining what is happening at the growing space near 31st and Pacific Streets. Michelle Roy, one of the organizers, said potential thieves are also warned that a surveillance camera is in operation.

"In our first two years, there seemed to be some confusion over what a community garden means," Roy said. "We had some people, who weren't (plot) renters, helping themselves to whatever they wanted."

Roy said the Hands to Harvest garden "really hasn't had any problems" since the signs went up in late summer of 2011 and members began asking im-

mediate neighbors "to keep an eye on the place."

Any surplus produce from the current garden, Roy said, will go to area food pantries.

The produce at the Dorothy Patach Park Garden near 20th and N Streets goes to anyone who wants it. Crystal Rhoades, one of the organizers of the second-year garden, said the garden holds about 50 semi-dwarf trees bearing cherries, apples, peaches and pears.

"Our intention is to let people come and help themselves," Rhoades said. "We send out information through the South Omaha Neighborhood Alliance when the fruit is ready to be picked, and any surplus is donated to nonprofit groups like the food bank."

Contact the writer:
402-444-1272, kevin.cole@owh.com