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Angela Baker helps people grow their own produce -- and donates to a food pantry -- through a teaching garden at her Northeast Portland home

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Casey and Angela Baker, here with 9-year-old Ruth and 9-month-old George, host a teaching garden in their yard to help low-income people learn how to grow their own food.

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In a sunny corner of her Northeast Portland home, Angela Baker is growing 200 tiny tomato plants. When they're big enough, she'll transplant 30 of them to her garden, and give the rest away to people who want to try their hand at growing their own.

Baker is the driving force behind the **Birch Community Services Teaching Garden**

(http://www.birchcommunityservices.org/Garden_BCSI_Year2.asp), located on a half-acre plot in **Parkrose** (<http://parkrose.eastportland.org/>) where Baker lives with her husband and four children. The goal of the garden is twofold: to teach people how to grow their own food, and to supplement the fresh offerings at the Birch food pantry in outer Northeast Portland.

The Bakers got involved with **Birch Community Services Inc. (BCSI)** (<http://www.birchcommunityservices.org/Default.asp>) several years ago when they were saddled with medical expenses stemming from their oldest daughter's congenital tooth problems. Baker, a stay-at-home mom, and her husband, a teacher, found themselves struggling to pay their bills and put food on the table.

"We were living in a little 700-square-foot rental house and eating a lot of rice and lentils for dinner," said Baker, 33.

She found out about Birch, an organization dedicated to the working poor, where people pay \$50 a month and volunteer at least two hours a month. In return, they receive hundreds of dollars worth of groceries and clothing, as well as access to classes such as personal finance, cooking on a budget -- and how to grow your own food.

When the Bakers moved to their house in Parkrose, purchased through **Proud Ground** (<http://www.proudground.org/>), a Community Land Trust, they saw it as the perfect opportunity to give back to the organization that had given them so much.

With the help of a small army of Birch volunteers, the Bakers have transformed their weed-filled lot into a fertile garden that produced 1,600 pounds of food last year, at a cost of only \$400. Their goal this year is 2,000 pounds. They keep costs down by

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scouring Craigslist for free building materials, soliciting donated seeds and relying on natural methods to control pests and promote plant growth (i.e. ducks that eat slugs and fertilize the garden).

From April through September, volunteers come to the property several times a week to plant, weed and harvest the produce. A volunteer coordinator helps organize the workers for Baker, who spends 15 to 20 hours per week in the garden during the growing season.

The entire yard, except for the area where the chicken coop stands, is given over to edible plants. Crops range from tomatoes and potatoes to greens, peas, beans, beets, turnips and summer squash. Newly planted apricot and apple trees will eventually become a small orchard. Other fruit includes currants, strawberries, huckleberries, marionberries and raspberries. Baker has even incorporated extra rows of strawberries and raspberries just for kids to snack on while their parents work.

"If the berries never make it to the warehouse and go home in their stomachs, that's okay," she said.

In addition, Baker offers numerous gardening workshops throughout the growing season, starting with how to plant potatoes and start seeds, and moving on to pest control, growing fruit, composting, and putting the garden to bed for the winter. In exchange for the free workshops, each participant spends two hours working in the Teaching Garden. Participants also leave with seeds, starts and cuttings to try in their own yards or in containers on their porches.

"I want people to feel like they can make mistakes in my yard," Baker said, adding, "I want them to know that it's economical to grow their own food."

Melody Matsuoka, a mother of two who lives in Happy Valley, is in her third year of volunteering with the Teaching Garden. She's enjoyed learning about permaculture techniques, which include making efficient use of every square inch to grow a variety of crops, and "lasagna gardening," a simple method of layering organic material in garden beds to create nutrient-rich soil.

Up until now, Matsuoka has grown only a few vegetables in containers outside of her house, but this summer, inspired by Baker, she's going to build raised beds with wood given to her by her uncle.

"It's really nice to have had this experience," she said of her work with the Teaching Garden, "because it shows what we'll actually eat." She plans to plant tomatoes, peas, winter squash, beets and carrots, as well as a variety of greens.

"My kids like to eat the baby greens raw out of the garden. They say they're like dinosaurs eating the leaves," Matsuoka said.

BCSI is currently partnering with another family, Brian and Julie Sunderland, to start a garden on their land in Gresham. Verdura Culinary Gardens, with the help of volunteers, will build and maintain 40 raised beds on the Sunderland's property, and all of the food grown will be donated to the Birch food pantry.

Barry Birch, founder of BCSI, views teaching people to grow their own food as an important way to help them become more self-sufficient. "We became aware that it's not hard to grow a tomato plant on your front porch," he said of their decision to add gardening workshops and the teaching garden to their list of offerings.

For Baker, it's a way to carry out what she said are the three basic tenets of permaculture: caring for the earth, caring for people and sharing what you have.

"To us, it seemed like a really good way to use what we've been blessed with," she said. "We obviously can grow a lot more here than we can eat."

For more information about the Birch Teaching Garden, contact Birch Community Services, Inc., at 503-251-5431, or go to [birchcommunityservices.org](http://www.birchcommunityservices.org) (<http://www.birchcommunityservices.org/>).

-- Anne Laufe, Special to The Oregonian

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