

He farms for the poor, and himself

Exec grows vegetables, finds fruitful retirement

By Nancy Shulins

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HAMDEN, Conn. — When Bill Liddell first contacted the Connecticut Food Bank, Nancy Carrington "envisioned yet another guy with half a bag of tomatoes and cucumbers."

"He presented himself very modestly, a guy growing a garden and having some surplus to donate," says Carrington, the food bank's interim director.

But the tall, rumped man with scrambled white hair who showed up had 50 pounds of summer squash, followed in short order by 350 pounds more. The squash harvested, he moved on to sweet corn, then tomatoes. Just after Labor Day, he started on greens.

By the end of the summer of 1985, Liddell had delivered 7,000 pounds of produce to the food bank's warehouse in New Haven. The staff was impressed, but he brushed off their thanks.

"You ain't seen nothing," he said. "Wait'll next year."

"A little better organized" in 1986, Liddell donated 16,000 pounds of home-grown vegetables.

In 1987, he topped 26,000 pounds.

Last year, when the skies dried up and the sun beat down until the soil cracked like an over-baked cake, Liddell harvested 28,000 pounds of food from his rocky three-fifths of an acre, all of it destined for Connecticut's poor.

BUT DON'T get the wrong idea about Bill Liddell. Just because a guy spends 40 hours a week on his 69-year-old knees growing food for the poor, and urges others to follow his example, is no reason to brand him a do-gooder.

"I'm no Mother Teresa," he says.

What he is is a veteran gardener who found himself face-to-face with retirement, a divorced father of four grown kids with no hobbies beyond the joys of coaxing fruit, flowers and vegetables out of the recalcitrant earth.

As Bill Liddell sees it, his giveaway garden is less an act of altruism than an act of survival.

"I've known retired people with more money than they know what to do with, but they've had jaws down to here," he says, cupping a dirt-stained hand over his belt buckle.

"I started out to keep doing what I've always done. It was not, 'How can I help the poor?', but 'What can I do with all this? Oh! I will give it to the poor.'"

Until a neighbor suggested a local shelter as a recipient of his bountiful harvest, "I knew zero about the homeless."

One might assume that a man who spends so much time toiling on behalf of



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Bill Liddell harvests green cabbages from his vegetable garden in Hamden, Conn.

treating back as he strides off in mid-sentence to yank a weed.

"He's very single-minded, but a lot of fun to work with," says Jean Heston, one of Liddell's "migrant workers," 16 men and women who take turns helping plant, weed or pick.

IN THE four years since he began, Liddell has seen his produce become a staple on soup kitchen menus around New Haven, the nation's seventh poorest city in per capita income.

The city of 125,000 has two soup kitchens; a third lost its lease several months ago and runs a food pantry while searching for new quarters.

At the Community Soup Kitchen, which serves 75,000 meals a year, "It's hard to describe how much Bill Liddell means to us," says coordinator David O'Sullivan.

The fruits of his labors were instrumental in helping the soup kitchen expand from soup and bread to full meals.

The Connecticut Food Bank, where Liddell delivers his vegetables, is at the

corn and peppers.

By his calculation, his three-fifths of an acre has served up about what the average home gardener might expect from an acre and a half. But after 35 years working as advertising director and in other positions for Asgrow Seed Co., which donates seed and fertilizer, Liddell isn't your average home gardener.

For one thing, his is a 10-month operation, beginning in February and continuing into December, long after the hardest volunteers have left for the winter.

Last year, he called it quits 10 days before Christmas, after harvesting a hundred pounds of collards and kale.

With an eye toward bigger yields and greater efficiency, he spends evenings scribbling in the large loose-leaf notebooks he uses to record weather, measure progress and plot strategy. So far, despite the blight that wiped out this year's tomatoes, he's ahead.

In mid-September, he harvested turnips from the same patch that bore cabbages during the summer. In another section, kale followed collard greens, which