



A farmer prepares the soil at EECO Farm in East Hampton.

courtesy of eeco farm

# Feed *The* People

*Stocking the shelves of  
local food pantries with  
fresh, healthy produce*

BY EMILY J. WEITZ

The phrase “food pantry” might conjure up images of cans stacked to the ceiling, paper bags packed with non-perishables like cranberry sauce and hamburger helper. But the Food Pantry Farm and the local food pantries of the East End are working hard to change that. Established in 2010 on the land of EECO (East End Community Organic) Farm, the Food Pantry Farm is a non-profit enterprise devoted entirely to providing the freshest, healthiest produce to those who need it most. They now deliver to East Hampton, Sag Harbor, Springs and Amagansett food pantries, as well as the Eleanor Whitmore Day Care Center, and The Retreat, the organization that helps victims of domestic violence.

The members of the board of the Food Pantry Farm, as well as the farmers themselves, work hard to not only offer fresh produce, but to grow the healthiest possible food on their organic soil.

“It’s very important that we have the highest nutrient value in the plants,” said John Melafronte, Director of the Food Pantry Farm. “We are very concerned about the quality that we give to the pantries.”

Darcy Hutzenlaub, farm manager, and Jack Castoro, field manager, use farming techniques that maximize nutrient value in their crops. For example, they are





# Pantries

currently resting a plot of land under 1,300 square yards of leaf compost so the soil can regenerate for the next crops.

"We need to reinvigorate the land," said Mr. Castoro. "It might not be as sweet as your sungold tomatoes, but when they have the highest lycopene levels or the antioxidant values, people learn that this is the healthiest tomato you can eat. They are appreciative of what we're doing."

And in the specific crops they choose to grow, nutrition is a consideration.

"Some varieties we grow, we grow specifically for the nutrient levels," said Mr. Castoro. "It might not be as sweet as your sungold tomatoes, but when they have the highest lycopene levels or the antioxidant values, people learn that this is the healthiest tomato you can eat. They are appreciative of what we're doing."

The people at the Food Pantry Farm don't believe that healthy food should be a luxury available only to the wealthy. But

for many East End residents, that is exactly the situation. They drive past the ripe red tomatoes spilling from their baskets, west on Route 27 to Riverhead to get the best prices at the big box stores. The Food Pantry Farm isn't the only local farm that gets produce to the local food pantries, but it's the only one whose sole mission is to provide for the food pantries.

"Everyone needs these things," said Mr. Castoro. "You eat these vegetables, and it's taking your multivitamin right out of the earth. It's important that people get this food that everyone should be eating and should be able to afford."

The farmers find that the more thought they puts into the process, the more people connect to their food. This ranges from people at the food pantries to those who purchase produce

*Bell peppers are among the fresh produce that EECO Farm's Food Pantry Farm provides to food pantries on the East End.*

at the farm stand at EECO Farm, which is grown on the same land and helps to support the work of getting the food into the pantries.

"People come back," said Ms. Hutzenlaub, "and say that our arugula has a specific taste to it, and that makes me think we're doing something right. There's a difference between what we're doing and what you can buy at the store."

The appreciation of farm fresh food is nothing novel in this community of CSAs and farm stands, but the price is too steep for many.

"We are trying to create a food system that helps the community," said Ms. Hutzenlaub, "and brings back local, healthy food."

This food, the organization believes, should not be a luxury. It should be available to everyone. ■