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Supporters urged to vote for Arma Community Garden in grant contest



Arma Community Garden is able to provide free food to the community thanks to help from volunteers.

COURTESY PHOTO

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Jonathan Riley, Morning Sun

ARMA, Kan. — In 2010, local nonprofit Live Well Crawford County was instrumental in establishing a community garden in Arma. Two years later, the group is continuing to find creative ways to keep the project going.

"So, we have been working with the Arma Nutrition Council on ways to sustain the community garden and we ran across this grant opportunity from Nature's Path Organic," said Matt O'Malley, director of outreach and development for Live Well. "We just decided to put in an application and got accepted to be one of the gardens that people could vote for."

The grant opportunity is a contest, called Gardens For Good, in which the top 21 winning gardens will each get \$5,000 from Nature's Path. More than 300 gardens are competing for the grants.

"They're throughout North America," O'Malley said. "Most of them are in big metropolitan areas, which means those places — they're huge garden sites, they've got lots of supporters, they're located at big organizations. And so we knew that if we were even going to even stand a chance against some of these large garden operations, that we were going to have to, you know, flex our PR muscle a little bit and spread the word."

As of early Friday afternoon, Arma Community Garden was in the top five out of all the gardens in the competition with more than 800 votes, "which is pretty remarkable, because this is for a community garden in a city of 1,450 people," O'Malley said.

Some large organizations, he said, including Ascension Via Christi Hospital in Pittsburg and Northeast School District in Arma, have assisted Arma Community Garden's efforts by forwarding O'Malley's email asking people to vote for it.

The Gardens For Good contest ends at 10 a.m. Wednesday, April 7. Although the number of votes each garden gets is a major factor in determining the 21 winning gardens, it is not the only consideration.

"Once voting closes, we will choose 21 winners based on the number of votes they receive AND an internal review of the applications," Nature's Path notes on its website.

If the Arma Community Garden wins one of the \$5,000 prizes, it will be up to the Arma Nutrition Council to decide how the money is spent, O'Malley said. Initial ideas include planting fruit trees or berry beds, building handicap-accessible raised beds on a concrete slab, setting the money aside to cover costs of buying new transplants, seeds and tools over a period of several years, or paying lead garden volunteers a small stipend to be in charge on Saturday work days.

"So we've got lots of ideas; we'll have to narrow it down, that's for sure," O'Malley said. "But those seem to be the leaders in the clubhouse right now, and it'll probably be some sort of a combination of all those things, right? Build some berry beds and plant some fruit trees and try and make some handicap-accessible raised beds while at the same time sort of setting some money aside to sustain this project for many years."

If the Arma Community Garden doesn't end up winning in the Gardens For Good contest, there are other ways for interested community members to help the community garden.

"We always need volunteers and donations to help us stock the food pantry at the Arma City Library. People can either call the Arma City Library or they could email our group, feedarma@gmail.com, and find out really how to get involved," O'Malley said.

Volunteers will be planting summer crops at the community garden throughout the month of May and would love to have help, O'Malley said. Specifically, they'll be planting tomatoes, peppers, squash, zucchini, cucumbers, okra, sweet corn and sweet potatoes. While volunteers are appreciated, though, ultimately there are financial costs to keep the garden operating.

"You know, money always helps, because then we can buy our garden plants and seeds and buy food for the food pantry," O'Malley said. "But just a simple one-minute vote has the potential of helping get this community garden \$5,000, which is a lot of money for a small community garden. It's going to make a big difference on how much food can be grown in Arma, by Arma, for Arma."

To vote for the Arma Community Garden in the Gardens For Good competition, visit naturespath.com/en-us/gardens-for-good#arma-community-garden.

"Even though we are doing really well right now, we are competing against huge metro areas with tons of supporters, and so we can't stop asking our friends and family and communities to vote," O'Malley said. "We need it to just keep happening."

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