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Environment Chair
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VEGGIES FOR VETERANS

Long Island has the second highest rate of returning veterans in the United States. Last June approximately 639 veterans registered for food assistance in Nassau and Suffolk counties. Most food pantries cannot carry fresh produce for those in need because of food storage issues. That's why most pantries are stocked with canned or boxed foods, which are not always the highest in nutritional value.

The Gateway Community Garden in Huntington Station is a fairly new, veterans' only planting area. The project came to fruition through collaboration between several entities. The Harry Chapin Food Bank, The Humanitarian Center and The Long Island Community Agricultural Network. The network manages the community garden that has 10 beds tended by veterans.

Each 20 by 5 foot plot can feed a family of four for a year if planted strategically for each season. The plots have been planted with okra, zucchini, eggplant and tomatoes. Eight of the new plots are assigned to veterans who signed up for the program and the other two shared plots pass along the food that's produced to other veteran's families. Other vets also donate excess veggies from their own gardens to further expand access to fresh produce to more veterans.

The garden started in 2010, and many vets have taken advantage of classes that are also offered on how to grow organic vegetables. Last summer the garden yielded 98 pounds of food. One veteran summed it up like this, "You go down there and you're outside in nature. It's a learning thing for me because I've never don anything like this before."

More projects like this are needed for so many returning and current veterans and their families. The network plans to add more beds in the future. Raised version of the beds are also planned to be accessible to those in wheelchairs and who have disabilities. The theory behind project is that just because someone is in need of a food pantry, it should not mean that don't deserve the healthiest food possible. This community garden serves those who've served, and it doesn't get much better than that!