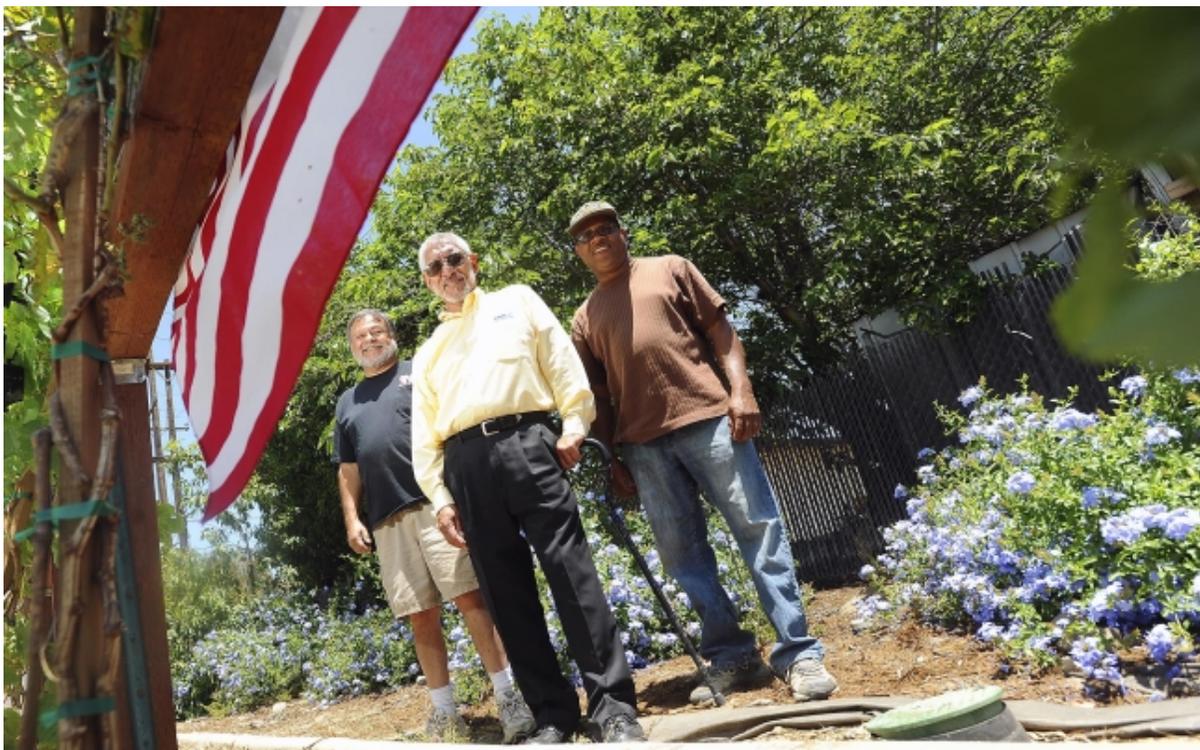


Veterans cultivate garden

[Michel Nolan, Staff Writer](#)

Posted: 06/10/2012 06:47:12 PM PDT



Members of the Disabled American Veterans Chapter 12 (from left) Marty Contreras Richard Valdez, and Chris Williams stand at the Veterans Community Garden in Highland on Thursday. (Gabriel Luis Acosta/Staff Photographer)

SAN BERNARDINO - Thanks to generosity and hard work, local members of the Disabled American Veterans have a garden to nourish both body and soul.

San Bernardino DAV Chapter 12 members have grabbed their shovels, rakes and garden hoses and learned how to plant an organic garden of vegetables, fruit, herbs and fruit trees.

An orchard of avocado and citrus trees - all dwarf trees so veterans in wheelchairs can help harvest the fruit - leads into the garden at Speicher Park.

Grape vines are growing near a flag pole where Army veteran Marty Contreras has designed a sculpture.

A sculptor and designer, Contreras has also done his share of gardening, along with his wife, Delia.



Volunteer Angel Martinez works in the community garden. (Gabriel Luis Acosta/Staff Photographer)

"My wife has donated tons of herbs and things and helps tend the garden," Contreras said.

Someday, veterans from the chapter hope the garden complex will include an arbor, a greenhouse and a grill/cooking section, among other things.

But it takes money.

That's why a \$25,000 prize from the Home Depot Foundation's Apron in Action Program would be a godsend.

San Bernardino DAV Chapter 12 is one of four veterans' nonprofits throughout the country competing for the prize after being nominated by the Home Depot Foundation.

Competing for the June prize - which is dependent on public voting on Facebook through the end of June - are the local group along with veterans groups in Ohio, Texas and New Mexico.

If the San Bernardino chapter is fortunate enough to be the winner, then it will be placed in a final competition for \$250,000 with 10 other winners.

First place is \$250,000; second is \$200,000 and third is \$150,000.

"Wherever we place in that race, we'll take it," said Richard Valdez, commander of the Chapter 12 DAV. "It all depends on the number of votes on Facebook."

Aprons in Action is on the Home Depot Foundation's Facebook page at [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com).



The community garden. (Gabriel Luis Acosta/Staff Photographer)

Voting is available on computers and mobile devices and people can vote throughout June. Winners of each monthly competition will compete for the grand prize of \$250,000 in May 2013.

Valdez said the garden will be a congregating point for veterans when the project is finished.

"The whole purpose of this is not only for the relaxation and wellness of veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, it's also ultimately for them to reintegrate into society because a lot of them isolate themselves and are shut-ins," Valdez said. "When they come here, they can integrate with nature and members of the community."

He recalled that last month, 22 veterans from the Loma Linda VA Medical Center rehabilitation group came to the garden on an outing. "Some watered, some planted vegetables, some did weeding and others sat in the shade and enjoyed it," said Valdez, a 65-year-old Marine veteran.

Navy veteran Chris Williams, who also works in the garden, said they hadn't harvested anything but a few kumquats so far. "This is an extremely good project," Williams said. "What the VA lacks, Richard has picked up for the garden."

The project, Veterans' Exploration Garden (or VEG), covers about a quarter-acre of city land at Speicher Park on Arden Avenue in San Bernardino. Neat rows of tomatoes, green beans, squash, bell peppers, zucchini and herbs grow in raised, stone-lined plots. Since the garden began in January, vegetables have already formed and are now ripening.

Valdez, who inspired the garden, recalled that when veterans' sessions would end in anger or other stress, the angry veteran would take off and when the group reconvened the next week, he was entirely different. Why the change? "They would always say, 'I tended my lemon trees or my flowers and that calmed me down.' I thought there are veterans out there who don't have that and maybe we can make it available to them."

The group plans to have a farmers market for veterans and eventually for the community - at no cost. Garden completion is set for the end of July.

Reach Michel [via email](#), call her at 909-386-3859.