**Headline:** The Homeless Garden Project Is Opening New Doors to Helping the Unhoused

**Teaser:** This one-year program provides transitional employment, job training, and housing resources for people experiencing homelessness.

By Damon Orion

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**[Article Body:]**

An analysis of data from 2017 and 2022 by the Pew Charitable Trusts points to a [direct connection](https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2023/08/22/how-housing-costs-drive-levels-of-homelessness) between high housing costs and homelessness rates in the United States. Unsurprisingly, a Santa Cruz County Civil Grand Jury 2024 report [stated](https://www.santacruzcountyca.gov/Portals/0/County/GrandJury/GJ2024_final/2024-7_HSA_Report.pdf) that the city, which the National Low Income Housing Coalition [ranked](https://lookout.co/santa-cruz-county-is-again-countrys-most-expensive-rental-market-and-gap-has-widened#:~:text='Mentally%2C%20physically%2C%20financially%20exhausting,jobs%20to%20meet%20that%20amount) as America’s most expensive rental market in 2023 and 2024, has the [most people](https://homelessnomore.com/exploring-the-highest-homeless-population-in-california-key-cities-and-trends) experiencing homelessness in California per capita.

A University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), research project called No Place Like Home [labeled](https://noplacelikehome.ucsc.edu/) Santa Cruz as “the least-affordable small city in the U.S.” It stated that this has led to “extreme rent burdens, precarious living situations, widespread displacement and homelessness,” which has a huge impact on the community.

A 12-month program called the [Homeless Garden Project](https://homelessgardenproject.org/) (HGP) is helping remedy this situation by providing unsheltered Santa Cruz residents with transitional employment, job training, and housing resources. Its participants earn $16.50 an hour working on a 3.5-acre organic farm in western Santa Cruz. They meet with social workers weekly to address barriers to employment and housing. To graduate, trainees must create exit plans with their social workers, meet a skills checklist, and complete exit interviews.

The HGP website [said](https://homelessgardenproject.org/our-impact/) that this project had generated 11,400 pounds of produce donated to local nonprofits, served 6,000 meals in 2023, and provided more than 22,000 hours of paid transitional employment as of 2024. Executive Director Darrie Ganzhorn says that from 2014 to 2024, 95 percent of the program’s graduates found jobs and 88 percent secured housing.

Paul Lee, an avid gardener and former professor of philosophy and theology at the University of California, Santa Cruz, co-founded HGP along with UCSC alumna Lynne Cooper (then Lynne Bashore) in 1990.

Lee [helped create](https://www.scvibesmagazine.com/stories/in-good-hands) the Citizens Committee for the Homeless (now known as [Housing Matters](https://housingmatterssc.org/about-us/mission-and-history/)) and launch the first homeless shelter in Santa Cruz County. “He would spend the night at the shelter when it first started,” Ganzhorn explains. “He said waking up in the morning was like waking up on the streets of New York City, and he wondered how people could ever dream of something better when they don’t have any safety or beauty in their lives.”

This led to the formation of HGP. The project’s website [states](https://homelessgardenproject.org/our-mission-our-story/) that this program “began as a place to provide sanctuary, refuge, and meaningful work within the healing space of the organic farm. Blossoming over time and furthering the project’s benefits, the farm harvests have provided an opportunity to support our vision and community through our [CSA program](https://homelessgardenproject.org/csa/), [farmstand](https://homelessgardenproject.org/farm-stand/), and crafts, which are sold at our local [Santa Cruz stores and online](https://homelessgardenproject.myshopify.com/).”

“Paul Lee really believed in gardens as a healing place, a place of sanctuary, a place where people could grow,” said Ganzhorn, according to a [blog](https://homelessgardenproject.org/homeless-garden-project-cultivating-a-better-world-for-25-years/) on the HGP website.

Donations provide the bulk of HGP’s income. “The biggest part is from individuals like you and me, but we also get some donations from local and national businesses and some grants from foundations,” Ganzhorn says. Additional revenue comes from government funding and [events](https://homelessgardenproject.org/events-calendar/) such as gourmet dinners and a [Day of Service in Honor of César Chávez](https://www.instagram.com/communitylifeservices/p/DHbcgXAtmL9/), who “[was a civil rights, Latino and farm labor leader](https://chavezfoundation.org/about-cesar-chavez/).”

[According](https://homelessgardenproject.org/be-the-difference-honoring-volunteers-at-homeless-garden-project/) to HGP’s site, this project gets help from more than 2,000 [volunteers](https://homelessgardenproject.org/volunteer-community-education/) yearly. Community members offer their time and service at the farm, store, and events. Some volunteers lead practice interviews to prepare participants for job interviews, and master of social work students intern for the project throughout the school year.

Volunteer work at the farm helps connect the housed and unhoused communities. “By design, when you’re out here, you don’t know who is in the program and who is volunteering, so it combats a lot of the stigma [around houselessness],” says Evan Jones, HGP’s programs manager.

Jones says HGP teaches “the importance of showing up on time, communication in the workplace, teamwork, and having a sense of ownership over specific tasks. We see a lot of people thrive with that. [We will start] a task at the beginning of the week, and by Friday, [a participant will say,] ‘Wow! I was the one who planted, weeded, and watered the kale.’ You can see folks light up through that.”

[Partnerships](https://homelessgardenproject.org/our-partners/) with like-minded businesses help expand HGP’s sphere of influence. For example, local employers like [New Leaf Community Markets](https://www.newleaf.com/?_gl=1*1n4j40d*_up*MQ..*_gs*MQ..&gclid=Cj0KCQjwv_m-BhC4ARIsAIqNeBsbgaYN8FqDXgKaFn5NP5fd08eMM9iU0oP1W9oHoP1B3k0cZstZYlUaAt5uEALw_wcB) have invested in hiring program graduates.

Ganzhorn explains that through the [Feed 2 Birds Initiative](https://shop.homelessgardenproject.org/products/feed-two-birds-csa-scholarship-fund?srsltid=AfmBOoq25UKKbRfQ-IQmO7O9EBLOBqbXfnoq2AVvDNJtf1I9_A4Ors1T), HGP uses funds contributed by community members to “buy CSA (community-supported agriculture) shares from ourselves.” The group then distributes these to local nonprofit agencies free of charge, and those organizations distribute them to the people they serve. Some of these resources go to families, people experiencing homelessness, and foster youth, while others help feed participants in Housing Matters’s [programs](https://housingmatterssc.org/get-services/our-programs/) and [Monarch Services’s](https://www.monarchscc.org/) emergency shelter residents, who are survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and human trafficking.

“Our trainees are growing, harvesting, and distributing food to low-income people in our community who might not have access to fresh, organic produce,” Ganzhorn says. “Instead of getting a handout, they are part of the solution.”

HGP trainee Chris Field, who works as the project’s farmstand manager and is learning organic farming techniques such as cover cropping, transplanting, and seed propagation, explains that before entering the program in 2024, he “was unhoused due to an alcohol addiction that pretty much took me out—sort of a [riches to rags story](https://homelessgardenproject.org/from-riches-to-rags-to-one-day-at-a-time/). I was sleeping in a tent on a beach. I couldn’t see any future and couldn’t believe how I’d gone from A to B… B being the bottom.”

Field now lives in a sober house where he enjoys simple comforts like showering, doing laundry regularly, and cooking for himself. “I have an income, so I can pay rent, which is incredible, considering that this is Santa Cruz,” he says.

After graduating from the program, Field hopes to secure a paid position that involves communication and working with people. “I definitely want a dog,” he adds.

Field says the only difficulty he faces as a trainee is “the challenge of having to leave [when the program is over]. It’s somewhere I’d like to stay. I’m not just making that up—it’s a great place.”