By KATHRYN RIDDLE

By this time next year, the McGregor Community Garden will bear bounty from its newly-planted orchard of donated apple and plum trees, thanks to Communities Take Root, a collaborative partnership between Edy’s Fruit Bars and the Fruit Tree Planting Foundation.

The nationwide initiative began three years ago, said Melissa Marasco, spokeswoman for Edy’s Fruit Bars, when the company decided to help communities whose residents do not have access to fresh fruit. According to Mary Beth Capell-Bovee, horticultural therapist and Community Garden coordinator, East Cleveland is considered by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to be a “food desert,” that is, an area with no Class A grocery stores, e.g. Giant Eagle, Heinen’s or Whole Foods. People in the community, she said, “rely on fast food and mini-marts where fresh fruits and vegetables aren’t available.”

Melissa and Mary Beth explained that Communities Take Root is an online campaign wherein public votes are cast to determine orchard contest winners among the nominated communities. Each entrant has been vetted beforehand to meet land, irrigation and care requirements. Mary Beth nominated The McGregor Community Garden that last spring started its own honeybee hive, was a finalist among more than 30,000 entries and one of this year’s 17 winners with nearly 26,000 votes.

Communities Take Root has awarded approximately 20 orchards each year, and with onsite assistance of the Fruit Tree Planting Foundation, has donated 1,600 fruit trees. FTPF arborist Rico Montenegro said that he has been all over the world helping to plant locally-sourced trees he buys for each orchard. Utilizing Google Earth, he is able to select each specific site prior to his arrival at each location where scores of volunteers arrive to dig holes and with his guidance, set each tree properly. Those volunteering at the McGregor Community Garden orchard planting represented a cross-section of the community that will help not only with its maintenance but also with reaping its benefits.

“arthritis is unacceptable — period!”

Dollars raised this evening, including the $21,000 from a “raise your paddle” challenge, will help fund support services and research. 

Versatility has never looked this good.

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“The Cuyahoga County Board of Health just gave us the approval for our residents at McGregor to be able to eat the orchard produce,” said Mary Beth. Some of the residents of the senior living facility set up the new commemorative bench to watch the tree planting and enjoyed, along with the planting volunteers, complimentary fruit bars from Edy’s.

“The mission of Communities Take Root is to plant 18 billion trees around the world, “making our communities blossom, one orchard at a time”.

With so many involved individuals in Northeast Ohio, it must be hard to single out a special few who go above and beyond to make life better for us all. Wisely, the Arthritis Foundation selected not one, but two couples as its 2012 “Community Leaders of the Year,” and made the presentation at a celebration at the Marriott Downtown.

The tribute to Sally and Bob Gries and Molly and Dan Walsh began with cocktails and a silent auction, giving the nearly 300 guests a chance to congratulate the honorees before dinner (a meal chosen by the honorees for its anti-inflammatory and healthy properties). Videos showed Bob and Molly’s individual challenges with arthritis, and how their experiences led them to help in the fight against the debilitating disease. Darby Schwartz, Division Vice President of the Arthritis Foundation, told the audience that the evening proved two things: one, that Cleveland is blessed with a wealth of “true community leaders.” And two, that “arthritis is unacceptable — parted!”

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