



# SHOW NOTES & TRANSCRIPT

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## EPISODE SHOW NOTES

**Episode Title:** Grow San Mateo

**Episode # & Date:** Episode #54 – December 31, 2020

**About this Episode:** In this special end-of-year episode, Judy showcases the efforts of GROW San Mateo and how they and the Samaritan House's Food Pharmacy are making a real difference providing nutrition for communities in need.

**Episode Web Page:** <https://sanmateofocus.com/grow-san-mateo/>

## EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

I'm Judy Gordon, and *this* is San Mateo Focus. As long-term residents who have raised six kids here, we thought it was high time someone shined a light on the good things in San Mateo to enrich the lives of those living here and the businesses that serve them. If you want to know the best places to eat and play, the events not to miss, *and* want to know how San Mateo became the crown jewel of the peninsula, tune in every Thursday and please be sure to click the 'subscribe' button on your favorite podcast app. Now, onto this week's episode.

We wanted to finish off the year with a good story that will send us all into 2021 with a sense of optimism for what the new year will bring to San Mateo. Frankly, the light that we were shining got a bit dimmer in 2020. But, thanks to a tip-off from City Council member Amourance Lee, I was introduced to resident Bill Schildknecht. Bill started GROW San Mateo, a community action project that at its heart is an informal group of gardeners, backyard foragers, and volunteers who donate the produce they grow to support the Samaritan House Food Pharmacy.

Bill has been a resident of San Mateo since 1991. Like so many of us, he had a busy work life for many years, and enjoyed San Mateo because of its central location and access to the outdoor activities that he loves. But, he wasn't really that tuned into the outdoors right outside his front door until he and his wife decided to rejuvenate their tired landscaping with the help of Circlefoot Permaculture, a local company that specializes in ecological land development. Observing the way Diego's team fed the soil and designed ways to better use resources like rainwater and grey water coming from the washing machine was revealing. Becoming a gardener and using both his front and backyard to grow food meant that Bill was outside more and interacting with neighbors and people who passed by and were interested in what he was growing. His idea for creating GROW San Mateo was inspired by Ron Finley's TED Talk. Mr. Finley lives in South Central Los Angeles, and has started an urban gardening movement as a solution to food and nutrition insecurity and preventable disease.

The Samaritan House Food Pharmacy was started in 2016 as part of the Free Medical Clinics in both San Mateo and Redwood City and is a collaboration between Samaritan House and 2nd Harvest Food bank. Patients of the free medical clinics are 'prescribed' healthy food. Bill learned that there was a challenge in getting fresh produce to the Food Pharmacy in San Mateo on 39th Avenue just due to the amount of time it takes to get a harvest from the farm through the food bank and stocked at the Pharmacy. A hyperlocal solution seemed to be needed. The underlying premise of the Food Pharmacy



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is that food is medicine. Unfortunately, nutritious, organic food is out-of-reach for many lower income households. As we're seeing in the current pandemic our neighbors with pre-existing conditions are more likely to have a severe case of COVID and many of their health issues, like diabetes and obesity can be 'treated' with a nutrient rich diet. GROW San Mateo provides a logistical solution to collecting donations and getting them stocked at the Food Pharmacy while they're still at the height of freshness.

Bill's idea was just to organize harvesting activities across many different San Mateo growers. Through word-of-mouth he started to get donations. Later they were able to coordinate with the two community gardens, Beresford and Los Prados, to have donation boxes installed. Bill receives a text message whenever a donation is put into the box - so he can quickly pick it up and get it stocked at the Pharmacy. Bill is able to drop everything to pick up a gardener's donation - he's finding that there are other generous people in the community who are willing to do the same.

Last fall when they first started delivering to the Food Pharmacy, GROW San Mateo accepted anything, and they were getting lots of vegetables like kale and sunchokes. Kale is still a hard sell and not everyone is familiar with sunchoke. Last winter, in preparation for the 2020 growing season - Bill was able to reach out to participating gardeners and provide more information about who the Food Pharmacy clients are, where they're from, what they might like. Instead of trying to teach a client how to eat kale, he's found that it's better to grow produce they've always known. Over ninety percent of the clients are originally from Latin America so something like chayote is very familiar and very popular. GROW San Mateo's objective is to give clients fresh produce ingredients that they've grown up with so there's little need to educate or persuade. For example, there is a pervasive weed in the gardens of San Mateo called purslane or in Spanish, verdolaga. A local gardener, Nickie Irvine, spent many years in South America as part of her academic career. Nickie taught Bill how to harvest nutrient rich verdolaga and she consistently donated bags to the Pharmacy all summer. There is a subtle but important difference between donating extra produce you have left over to actually growing for other people. Bill refers to it as growing for a purpose, growing for good. The amazing thing about San Mateo is the micro-climate, it's one of the best in the country for gardening year-round. Right now, the gardens are in a transition with root crops like carrots, radishes, leeks, and beets that will be ready to harvest in the next month or so—also, lots of cilantro and snap peas. The Pharmacy does not stock leafy greens simply due to the challenge of keeping them fresh.

One of the challenges that needed to be overcome was gaining trust from the local gardening community that the produce they've lovingly grown, likely from seed, will actually be consumed by people in need. To help create more of a farmers market experience for the clients, Bill explains that instead of bringing buckets of tomatoes to the pharmacy, he and his wife and another volunteer, package and merchandise them in pressed fiber cartons with GROW San Mateo labels. One of the unique benefits of GROW San Mateo is the close coordination with the staff at the free medical clinic on West 39th Ave. This relationship enables the pharmacy to accept local gardener donations.



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I asked Bill what he's learned running the GROW San Mateo project for the last year. He says it gave him greater visibility into the help that happens at Samaritan House. In an unprecedented time of suffering he has seen almost daily examples of people in the San Mateo community coming together to help those in need. He has never been more proud to say that he lives in San Mateo.

Most people want to help, they just might not know how. At the core, this is something that communities have been doing forever. It's reinvigorating an old idea of communities sharing food and being closer to the soil. GROW San Mateo allows backyard gardeners and foragers to be closer to the recipient of the food that they have grown with great care.

During our talk, Bill mentioned so many people who have inspired him and helped GROW San Mateo during the last year. The more good that can be acknowledged in this episode, all the better. So here is how GROW San Mateo grew.

A few people don't know that they provided inspiration. Along with Ron Finley's TED talk, A former local resident, DJ Eckelbarger, used to maintain beautiful dahlia beds in Beresford Park before he moved out of the state. Recreating those beds were the first steps in developing GROW San Mateo. With the help and support of Donna Divodi from the City of San Mateo, the website was created and GROW San Mateo started. Betty Chen, a teacher at the San Mateo Adult school introduced Bill to growing chayote. Patty Hsiu, a member of the Board of Directors of Samaritan House, introduced Bill to Bart Charlow, the CEO of Samaritan House. Bart told him about Dr. Jason Wong, at the San Mateo Free Clinic and founder of the food pharmacy. Dr. Wong's patient guidance has kept Bill motivated to continue the work he's doing. Marci Wigeri van Edema, Bill's contact at the Beresford Community Garden, helps with the donation box and the front planting bed that is used exclusively for Grow San Mateo. And, most importantly, all of the backyard and community gardeners and foragers who have donated beautiful grapes, persimmons, lemons, heirloom tomatoes, peppers, and other produce that eventually are prescribed by Dr. Wong and his staff at the free clinic and given to clinic patients.

Our San Mateo Focus team wants to thank you for listening in 2020, and we wish you a New Year full of health and happiness. If you're now looking at your yard in 2021 as a potential space to grow healthy plants and greens that can eventually be prescribed by Dr. Wong at the Samaritan House Food Pharmacy, *Here's the deal:* GROW San Mateo has information on their website at [www.growsanmateo.org](http://www.growsanmateo.org). Follow them on Instagram @growsanmateo to see the work in process. And finally, you are welcome and encouraged to email Bill at [Bill@growsanmateo.org](mailto:Bill@growsanmateo.org).

Okay, that's all the time we have for this episode. Have a great week. Don't forget to subscribe to San Mateo Focus on your favorite Podcast app. As always, if you'd like more information about the topics in today's episode or any of our sponsors, visit [sanmateofocus.com](http://sanmateofocus.com).

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[Video: Ron Finley TEDx Talk](#)

[Website: Grow San Mateo](#)

Instagram: [@growsanmateo](#)

Contact: [bill@growsanmateo.org](mailto:bill@growsanmateo.org)

[Website: Circlefoot Permaculture](#)

[Webpage: Samaritan House Food Services](#)

[Website: San Mateo Free Medical Clinic](#)

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## PODCAST SHOW NOTES

Podcast Name: **San Mateo Focus**

Logo:



Description: We created San Mateo Focus to shine a light on the good things in San Mateo in order to enrich the lives of those living here and the businesses that serve them.

Website: <http://www.sanmateofocus.com>

Email: [info@sanmateofocus.com](mailto:info@sanmateofocus.com)

Host & Founder: Judy Gordon

Producer/Co-host: Peter Radsliff

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