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Central City eyesore will become fruit orchard

More than 30 trees are donated

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The sun beat down on David Fleagle as he hauled debris from the rear of a vacant lot in Central City to the curb for disposal.

He has lived near the makeshift dumping grounds for years, and jumped at the chance to help out when he heard the eyesore was finally being transformed into a fruit orchard for the neighborhood.

"This should get people around here to see what can be, and get them to join in," Fleagle said Tuesday. "I do it because if I don't, who will?"

More than 30 citrus, persimmon and fig trees were planted Wednesday on the lot at 2715 S. Saratoga St. after it had been cleared by neighborhood volunteers, constituting the latest in a string of community gardens started by nonprofits on blighted properties since Hurricane Katrina.

This one was the work of Jericho Road Episcopal Housing Initiative, aided by a donation from Communities Take Root, a program sponsored by Edy's Fruit Bars and the Fruit Tree Planting Foundation.

The lot, measuring 57 by 150 feet, was purchased by Jericho Road in 2007, and posed development challenges because of its large size and the fact that it is surrounded by apartment buildings, said Alison Ecker, director of the nonprofit's Vacant Land Management program. It was also a struggle to keep free of debris, even after the group fenced it off.

"When we found out about the competition for the fruit trees, we thought that an orchard would be a great solution," she said.

The competition required applicants to list their goals for the orchard and spell out precisely how the 33 donated fruit trees would be tended and irrigated. After Jericho Road's application was accepted and community voting was tallied online, the Saratoga Street Fruit Orchard was one of 25 winners nationwide.

Fleagle currently watches over a Jericho Road community garden at Dryades and Sixth streets, across from his apartment. He plans to help take care of the orchard as well.

"What would be really great would be if the orchard gives kids in the neighborhood something to do," he said.

Holly Heine, Jericho Road's director of operations and communications, says that hands-on learning is a key goal of the project. She also sees the orchard as a means to another important end: building bonds among neighbors.

"After the initial phases are complete, the orchard will be the residents' to tend to and manage," Heine said. "It will be up to them what happens to it and they will be the ones making the decisions about how to manage it and how to distribute the produce."

Central City isn't the only neighborhood to benefit from the Fruit Tree Planting Foundation's efforts.

Just last month, the foundation partnered with Stretch Island Fruit to install fruit trees at Andrew Wilson Charter in Broadmoor, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Charter School for Science and Technology in the Lower 9th Ward, and Belle Chasse Academy in Plaquemines Parish.