Neighbors from all over the Excelsior district gathered in Joanna Arteaga's front garden on France Avenue last Saturday to eat together after a morning of sharing shovels and hammering in tree stakes. The group had just planted more than 50 trees during a Friends of the Urban Forest neighborhood tree planting.

Mixing with the planters was Colette Devou, legislative assistant to San Francisco Supervisor Gerardo Sandoval, who talked about the supervisor's anti-paving initiative. Sandoval helped plant the first tree of the morning.

Young artists from Bayview Hunters Point Center for Arts and Technology were in the crowd. They filmed the Friends' Youth Tree Care crew, which was called in for the big planting.

Members of the San Francisco Garden Club, also at the potluck, donated $10,000 for trees in this neighborhood as part of their new strategy to diversify their donations.

"It was a very significant donation," said Suzanne Whelan, the Friends' community outreach coordinator.

"The city planted Mission and Persia streets years ago, but the majority of the Excelsior's streets are unplanted. It has been many years since we've matched a local donating organization with a neighborhood, and it's made a big impact," she said. The donation allowed the Friends to offer trees to Excelsior residents for just $50 each, instead of the standard rate of $335.

The donation "made us feel lucky, and often the Excelsior feels forgotten," said Donna Sharee, volunteer neighborhood organizer for the planting. Sharee is a graphic designer who has lived on Naples Street for 15 years and who organized three other Friends tree plantings in the district in the past seven years "to make our neighborhood feel greener."

For this planting, she held meetings and designed flyers. Also, helped by a group of neighbors, she produced hundreds of door hangers in three languages to encourage more residents to join the effort.
Beautifying the city was one of the founding goals of the San Francisco Garden Club in 1926. William Crocker held the position of treasurer, and John McLaren, who ran Golden Gate Park for almost 50 years, was elected the honorary chairman. Early on, club members planted Chinese elms along Arguello Boulevard, and many of those magnificent trees are still there.

During World War II, the club sent terrariums to soldiers at the front, said Judith Taylor, the club's board secretary and honorary librarian, and author of two horticultural history books, "The Olive Tree in California" and "Tangible Memories."

In 1950, the club began to provide educational scholarships named after Alice Eastwood, director of the herbarium at the California Academy of Sciences at the turn of the 20th century. Because Eastwood had developed a careful plan in the event of an earthquake, in 1906 she managed to get the herbarium out of the damaged building intact.

For more than 50 years, scholarships have been awarded to students enrolled in the environmental horticulture and floristry department at City College of San Francisco. Recently, the club gave the department an additional $25,000 to help improve its gardens and library. Since the 1970s, the club has also sponsored a garden design competition at UC Berkeley's landscape architecture department.

In 1992, the women of the club (it has always been a de facto women's club, even though the bylaws make no reference to gender) stormed the cable car turnaround at Powell and Market streets wearing aprons and carrying brooms to beautify that part of the city.

"The area was a terrible mess," said Taylor, and the women cleaned it and kept it clean for many months; then they financed the cleaning until the local merchants organization took over the responsibility.

A bigger job landed in their laps in 1995. A storm at the end of the year knocked down many trees in Golden Gate Park and also "pretty much knocked the 100-year-old Conservatory of Flowers off its pins," said Taylor. The club spearheaded the restoration of the conservatory, raising half a million dollars.

During construction, a stone bench was found inscribed with the name Sidney Stein Rich. No one knew who that was. Taylor spent a year researching and discovered that Rich was the first female gardener employed by Golden Gate Park.

McLaren, a gruff man, made her do "a whole year of digging before he let her go forward," said Taylor. The daughter of Russian immigrants, she eventually became the manager of plantings at Golden Gate Park.

Until recently, the San Francisco Botanical Garden at Strybing Arboretum was the major recipient of the club's donations, receiving $50,000 in the past three years. Last month, at the club's luncheon in the elegant dining room of the Metropolitan Club on Sutter Street, the new director of the botanical garden, Brent Dennis, heartily thanked the club for its support.
Botanical Garden Executive Director Michael McKechnie said the club has supported the youth education program and its capital campaign. The education program brings 10,000 children from the city's public schools to the garden each year, on guided walks, or participating in educational projects in the children's garden. The capital campaign aims to raise almost $30 million to renovate the garden and to build a plant propagation and education center.

But last year, the garden club decided to put some money directly into neglected parts of the city. Taylor, who sits on both the Civic Participation and Alice Eastwood scholarship committees, said it represented a maturation of its donation policy. The change came about as a result of "a series of small epiphanies," she said.

"In my case, it was the casual remark of a very wise friend who suggested the club support Urban Sprouts. We were looking at their video at the San Francisco Flower Show. 'That's the work we should be doing,' I said to myself. 'The children need to learn to garden and we are a garden club.'"

The club made a $5,000 donation to Urban Sprouts, a nonprofit that builds and uses gardens in schools to "help youth actively engage in school, eat better and exercise more, and connect with the environment and each other." Abby Jaramillo, executive director of Urban Sprouts, said the donation helped them build a new school garden program at Martin Luther King Jr. Academic Middle School in the Portola neighborhood.

"With support from the garden club," she said, "we worked with the entire sixth grade last year to provide garden-based education as part of the standardized science curriculum. The garden makes a huge difference to the youth - classes have up to 30 students, so the chance to go outside, learn hands on and get attention from our staff and volunteers is very valuable. Now students chat with each other about how tasty organic vegetables are. We find they eat more vegetables, too."

Sharee said the Excelsior tree planting is about community building as much as trees. "It's hard to make friends with your neighbors," she said. "I made friends on my block at the first tree planting, and that's been invaluable. With everyone, there's a little bit of a bond. After a tree planting, people often ask one another in the street, 'How is your tree growing?'"

At the potluck, over generous plates of food, people introduced themselves and sorted out who was who, and who had volunteered in which ways. Naomi LeBeau, Friends of the Urban Forest's planting manager, called for a special thanks to the San Francisco Garden Club for making the trees so affordable. A hearty cheer went up.

The founding members of the garden club would have liked to hear that. Besides beautifying the city, their mission was "the banding together of those who are fond of gardens and flowers."

San francisco garden club's annual fundraiser
The event will be April 11 at the Four Seasons. (415) 771-0282. www.sanfranciscogarden club.org

E-mail Hazel White at home@sfchronicle.com.

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