

Mililani Memorial Park & Mortuary, Waipahu, HI

Hawaii is an island paradise. Our location, in the middle of the Pacific, has created a natural barrier from the COVID pandemic causing Hawaii to be the state with the lowest per capita infections. This has also created a bottleneck for fresh goods and consumables such as toilet paper. While that may sound funny, a recent run, on toilet paper, back in April of 2020, has left hoarders with garages full and lots of people without. Local Costco Warehouses even had to place a limit on the amount of TP per person, per day to be sure there was enough to go around. Everything needs to be shipped into Hawaii by either barge, or by air, increasing costs by sometimes as much as double. Strict restrictions about essential businesses and quarantines for inbound passengers during the pandemic left our tourism economy crippled and lots without a paycheck and no way to feed their families. A friend of ours whose wife was recently unemployed started seeking assistance from local churches and food distribution sites to cover the deficit created by the pandemic. When we spoke, they could not express how blessed they were that they were able to access staples like rice, beans, eggs, canned meat and non-perishable items like cereal. What they did express was a lack of produce to create balanced meals for their family.

As a growing cemetery with 108 total acres, we decided that we could use some of our undeveloped land to help with that lack of produce for our residents. Over the course of a month, we cleared nearly 2 acres of pristine land, out of public view, and prepared that for planting. During a test run, we noticed that items like corn or melons were ravished by the insect populations while pumpkin (kalabasa) and squash (tabungao) were left to grow and thrive. We did not want to use any type of pesticides and instead opted for the natural thick skin of the pumpkin and squash to keep the insects at bay. Over the course of a 6-month season beginning in September 2020 and ending in March 2021, Mililani Memorial produced over 2 tons of fresh vegetables for local food distribution sites. In November 2020, Mililani donated its first crop of Long Squash to St. Stephen's Episcopal Church at 1679 California Ave in Wahiawa. They received 40 pieces (appx 400lbs) to distribute at their biweekly event. The next donations for St. Stephen's came in December and then January, totaling over 150 pieces (1500 lbs.) each delivery. The delivery dates had to coincide with the distribution and when the next two harvests were made, we needed to find a different distribution point or risk spoilage of the perishable vegetables. Our Lady of Sorrows Catholic Church in 1403-A California Ave, Wahiawa was happy to distribute the fresh veggies at their February '21 and March '21 food distribution event. At both events we provided over 150 pumpkins (750 lbs.) and 50 (500 lbs.) squash, a welcomed addition to the regular bag of canned goods and packaged dry goods. The season has passed and while the squash and pumpkins have reached their lifespan, we are preparing the ground for next year's program.

If there is one good thing that has emerged from this pandemic it is a realization that Hawaii is very susceptible to changes in the ability for producers of fresh goods to get their items to our beautiful state. We also realized that by banding together, we can weather any storm by helping each other out.