

Police

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uproot poppies

75 plants in garden project
under study for opium content

BY TERRI MORGAN
Special to the Mercury News

Santa Cruz police say they found 75 suspected opium poppies smack in the middle of the Homeless Garden Project, but gardeners say no one is getting a buzz from the bulbs.

Acting on a tip from a neighbor who claimed opium was being grown and harvested at the garden, Santa Cruz police officer Phil Collum went to the 2½-acre organic plot near Lighthouse Field and found 75 4-foot-tall poppy plants topped with delicate, fist-sized red blossoms.

After noticing that many bulbs had been scratched by a razor and drained in an apparent attempt to harvest opium, police pulled the poppies. They were turned over to the county narcotics task force for identification.

The garden project was founded in 1990 to help homeless people develop marketable skills growing flowers and vegetables on a plot owned by the city of Santa Cruz. Last year, 20 paid workers grew eight tons of vegetables, which were sold to local grocery stores, restaurants and at farmers markets.

Garden directors say the poppies were ornamental — not opium-producing — and were planted for their looks.

"To the best of our knowledge . . . the plants in question were obtained by the Homeless Garden

See **POPPIES**, Page 2B

Suspicious poppies in homeless garden uprooted

SJM JUL 29 1993

■ POPPIES

from Page 1B

Project from reputable sources and are ornamental tulip poppies, *papaver glaucum*, not opium poppies, *papaver somniferum*," said Paul Lee, vice-chairman of the Citizens Committee for the Homeless in a news release.

"The policy at the Homeless Garden Project is and has always been to prohibit the presence or use of alcohol and any form of narcotics," Lee added. "We are conducting our own review and will cooperate fully with the authorities."

Darrell Darling of the garden's board of directors said seeds for the poppies found on the site are available from gardening catalogs throughout the

country. Local botanical experts have confirmed the poppies were an ornamental species, Darling said, although he refused to name the experts.

Police do not have any suspects, said Santa Cruz police Lt. Chuck Gilbert. The garden is not fenced, he noted, and anyone can walk in.

"They very well may have been planted because they're pretty," Gilbert added.

Gilbert said even if the plants are identified as opium poppies, the case will not receive high priority because so few plants were involved.

"It's not like marijuana, where someone can make a big profit from a few plants," he said. "It takes many acres and many people to grow enough opium for it to be profitable in this country."