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Joy Brown, center, picks lettuce in a Fuquay-Varina garden. Robert Anderson and Elizabeth Huff work on spinach. Robert Willett, Staff Photo by Robert Willett

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## Gardens yield food, fruits of spirit

### Church activity fosters oneness

**BY YONAT SHIMRON, Staff Writer**

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Church members walk down the rows to take their seats in pews every Sunday. Now they are walking down rows of beds planted with everything from arugula to zinnias.

From the northern Orange County community of Cedar Grove to the southern Wake County town of Fuquay-Varina, church members are planting community gardens and cultivating a host of organic fruits, vegetables, herbs and flowers for the tables of their workers and for the benefit of the church, local food pantries and other nonprofit groups.

This enthusiasm for fresh food is part of a larger food revolution driven by a growing awareness of flaws in the industrial food system and their moral and theological implications. Just last month, Michelle Obama planted a garden on the White House lawn. But church-sponsored community gardening is not just the latest politically liberal, do-gooder project.

Some of the gardens' most devoted caretakers are people who want more outdoor exercise, agricultural know-how, a sense of community or a desire to relive a way of life that is no more. And many say they find the experience every bit as spiritual as a church service.

Chris Burtner, the founder of Fuquay-Varina's quarter-acre Covenant Community Garden, said a groundswell of interest among churches has recently become a stampede.

"My phone will not stop ringing," said Burtner, a member of Fuquay-Varina United Methodist Church. "I've talked to three churches just this week."

On Saturday, Apex United Methodist Church consecrated a 10,000-square-foot plot of land several blocks away from the church on Hughes Street. Members put up a fence to keep out deer, installed drip irrigation and began tilling the soil. The land, owned by longtime church member Jeanne Hack and given to the church for use as a garden, will be cultivated by members and non-members alike. Anyone who wants to join will pay \$10 a year and be expected to work one hour per month. The garden's bounty will be divided among members and given to the Western Wake Crisis Ministry.

"It's amazing how many people from the community are really excited about it," said Anne Harrison,

one of the garden's organizers and a member of Apex Methodist. "It became a thing we couldn't not do."

Churches in Cary, Durham and Wake Forest are in various stages of planning or planting gardens and rediscovering the multiple ways in which the Bible is concerned with agriculture and the health of the community.

Recently, Bishop Al Gwinn of the N.C. Conference of the United Methodist Church appointed a task-force on food. And while the majority of community gardens in the Triangle are sponsored by Methodist churches, others, including Episcopalians, Baptists and nondenominational churches are fast on their heels.

The Interfaith Food Shuttle dedicated a garden and is planning a series of local community gardens as part of its mission to eradicate hunger.

"It's honestly been one of the most wonderful experiences of my life," said Burtner of Fuquay-Varina. "We're a community at the garden. We look forward to working together, sharing recipes, caring for each other's children. There's a presence of God in the garden."

#### A garden for healing

The 2005 daytime murder of Bill King in a bait-and-tackle shop in the northern Orange County town of Cedar Grove spurred what may be the first -- and certainly the most successful -- church-sponsored community garden in the Triangle.

On 5 acres of land near the murder site, Cedar Grove United Methodist Church sought to heal the community by planting a garden. Today, Anathoth Community Garden is in its fourth season.

Last year, its 75 member families produced a ton of sweet potatoes, 800 pounds of Irish potatoes and a host of other fruits, vegetables, herbs and flowers from its raised-bed garden and solar greenhouse.

The garden functions as a co-op: Members pay \$5 a year and must work at least two hours a week. On Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays, the work day ends with a potluck in the church kitchen. Surplus food is donated to elderly families in the community.

More than half the garden's members are not church members. Fred Bahnson, the garden director, said the members are a diverse group that includes about 20 Hispanic members and a dozen African-Americans.

"Part of the goal was to create a community where anyone feels welcome," said Bahnson. "If you join, great. If not, that's OK."

But the church, which leases the land at \$1 a year from a fifth-generation sharecropper's descendant, sees its mission as flowing out of a Christian worldview.

In the Book of Genesis, Adam is created from "adama," the Hebrew word for "earth." In Genesis 2:15, Adam and Eve are given the responsibility to "work and to watch" the garden. In the New Testament, Paul admonishes people for eating too fast and not waiting for one another.

At Anathoth, the church celebrates a Eucharist service in the garden every Saturday, consecrating the bread and wine at the heart of the Christian ritual.

"We see a real link with the Eucharist," said Bahnson. "As Christ feeds us with the Eucharist, we're called to go out and feed others."

For Bahnson, food grown in the garden should not be wolfed down as so much fast food is consumed. Rather, it is to be shared with others as part of a mindful daily habit that connects people to God and community.

"Food is a mystery," said Bahnson, a graduate of Duke Divinity School.

"It channels God's presence," he added. "We're trying to reclaim the sacramental sense of eating together."

Eleven churches, including one from Virginia and another from Maryland, recently attended a conference on starting community gardens at Anathoth. A ministry intended to heal Cedar Grove is now spreading hope far beyond.

### The joy of gardening

For Chris Burtner, starting a garden came out of a desire to teach children the joys of sticking their hands in the dirt.

Her two girls loved to play in the garden at home. She said that one day as she was walking home from church, God gave her a vision for a garden where other children could share the experience.

In October 2006, that dream became a reality on a patch of land behind the church parking lot.

From the start, Burtner knew she wanted to farm sustainably so as not to deplete the soil. That meant creating a rich compost from kitchen scraps, rotating crops from one plot to another in different growing seasons, and planting "cover crops," alfalfa, or oat and clover, in areas that weren't being used.

Last year, the gardeners planted 40 different crops, including six different types of lettuce, spinach, beets, carrots, radishes, Brussels sprouts, broccoli and cabbage.

In the back of the garden are two honeybee hives, and the Wake County Beekeepers Association runs a beekeeping course there.

Last week, a dozen gardeners -- including several children -- showed up on a chilly and cloudy Wednesday afternoon to harvest lettuce, plant more spinach, weed and turn the compost.

"We have to fight the notion that this is just a hobby," said Debra Dean Murphy, director of Christian education at the church. "This is at the heart of what it means to be a community."

Bob and Beverly Anderson, two church members who regularly work in the garden, had no problem with that concept.

"Our church is so big you can't meet everyone," said Beverly Anderson. "When you come here you meet people -- church members and others -- and you work together."

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