





# COMMUNITY GARDENS

## BLESSED BE THE SOIL THAT BINDS

BY DEBBIE MOOSE  
PHOTOS BY J. CHRIS CARMICHAEL

**M**y father was not a church-going man, but he believed in two things: treat others as you'd like to be treated, and plant lots of tomatoes. His backyard garden was the neighborhood vegetable basket.

My father would approve of the growing popularity of community gardens that foster working together, feeding the hungry and teaching children about the land. These gardens, often started by churches, grow connections among diverse groups along with the spinach and cabbage.

Community gardens are simply plots of land worked by many people who all share in the harvest. They're popping up at public libraries, schools and urban vacant lots, where they can aid neighborhood revitalization. The idea is becoming so popular in this state that North Carolina State University Cooperative Extension Service in Raleigh and North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro have developed programs to help groups get gardens growing. Grace Summers, who works with the N.C. A&T program, says that she expects interest in community gardens to increase as the national economic situation sparks a desire to save money by growing produce.

Many churches and other faith-based organizations see alleviating hunger, in a way that preserves the Earth and promotes justice and community, as a sacred mission. And a garden fits right into that philosophy.

What may be the first church-based community garden in the state arose from a desire to heal a community rent by tragedy and conflict. In 2004, a murder in little Cedar Grove exposed racial divisions in the community. Members of Cedar Grove United Methodist Church, a predominantly white church, and members of the black community

looked for ways to bridge that divide. The group decided on a garden, where anyone, not just church members, could work together, learn about each other and share healthy food.

The result is Anathoth Community Garden, 1 1/2 acres of organically grown crops, a hoophouse for raising seedlings, a play area for children and a covered gathering place where weekly potluck meals and concerts take place during the growing season. Fred Bahnson, who has been garden director since it started in 2005, says the garden has about 75 member families now. Thirty to forty people work the garden each week between March and November.

The garden is named after a city in the Bible's book of Jeremiah, which equates gardens and care of the land with the peace of communities and individuals. Bahnson's work attracted the attention of the Kellogg Foundation, which awarded him a fellowship to write about food and faith.

"Has it accomplished what we hoped? I think it has," says Bahnson, a graduate of Duke University's divinity school. "More so than any other place, this garden has a way of breaking down barriers. The garden is such a non-threatening place for people to come together and learn about each other."

Chris Burtner noticed the same effect when she helped start Covenant Community Garden at her church, Fuquay-Varina United Methodist. As with most community gardens at churches, people don't have to be members in order to participate. "It's another way of bringing people together, people of different faith backgrounds and no faith back-

# Ten steps to a successful community garden

from North Carolina A&T State University

1. Define the purpose of the garden. Possible purposes include recreation, therapy, youth development, fostering community, improving nutrition, entrepreneurship and education.
2. Identify the target audience of garden participants. These may be members of the community, church or youth groups; senior citizens, the handicapped or those interested in supplementing their income.
3. Find the movers and shakers in the target audience to serve as leaders.
4. Identify people who have the power to help the project happen. For example, the local city government may have to approve using a vacant lot.
5. Identify a garden site. Potential sites include vacant lots, schools, housing developments, churches and centers where people tend to congregate.
6. Get permission to use the site. Have your sales pitch ready along with answers to any liability questions that may come up. Will there be a plot fee? Who will be in charge of the site?
7. Prepare the site. Think about cleaning up trash, soil preparation, making sure a water source is nearby, marking plots and pathways, and fencing.
8. Have a meeting to fire up the gardeners for the project and to discuss rules and other requirements. Decide what fees participants will pay and rules for receiving produce.
9. Hold a "grand opening" event to draw participants. Think about a seed giveaway or other draw to get people there. Appoint a garden coordinator.
10. Hold meetings during the growing season to discuss problems. Some that may crop up are vandalism, relations with the garden's neighbors, theft and water use. The meetings are a good time for educational programs.



grounds. People who wouldn't set foot in a church come in the garden," Burtner says.

The 5,000-square-foot organic garden, in its third growing season, has about half the number of participants as Anathoth. It includes herbs, a "bean tent" for climbing green beans, and beehives. The garden gets a small amount of funding from the church, plus participants pay a small fee and drum up a lot of donations from garden shops. It works similarly to many other gardens: participants sign up to work a certain number of hours a month, pay the fee, and take home vegetables on each day they work. Some of the crops also go to area soup kitchens.

Burtner found that children were more willing to sample unfamiliar vegetables if they were involved in growing them. "You'd be surprised how much the children have taken to eating things they wouldn't eat before," she says. "One little boy got so excited when the spinach came in, he said, 'Miss Chris, I eat two vegetables now.'"

A garden offers a wide range of teaching opportunities for children, as organizers at Dillard Academy in Goldsboro found out. The charter school for grades K-4 started organic garden plots, along with First African Baptist Church, about two years ago, says Cheryl Alston with the Wayne County Food Initiative, who helped organize the garden. Teens and adult volunteers have since become involved. "It incorporates reading, math and science with the garden," says Alston, a retired teacher. "Kids see how vegetables develop, and it's really an 'a-ha' moment."

The children run their own Saturday roadside market during the growing season, so they learn marketing, sales and pricing skills. Some are even thinking about careers in agriculture or food production.



“Children who were behind, improved,” Alston says, because they had to make good grades to participate. “They wanted to do better in school so they could work in the garden.”

The students made up a song about the garden and its vegetables, which found its way to the Kellogg Foundation. In April, the group will perform their number for the foundation’s annual meeting in San Jose, California.

Older folks taught canning to the students, who made and sold their homemade chow-chow. Alston says an unexpected benefit was the interaction between retirees and the young people, as students asked the experienced gardeners about what kinds of vegetables to plant and what to do about problems.

So, community gardens can be schools, social outlets, places to explore new flavors, and more.

As Michael Schut, officer for economic and environmental affairs for the Episcopal Church in Seattle, told participants in a recent community gardens workshop: “A tomato becomes not only food, but a symbol of the ways we care for each other. That tomato becomes sacramental.” *eP*

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Freelance writer and lifelong North Carolinian Debbie Moose of Raleigh has written four cookbooks, most recently *Wings*. She writes two columns in *The News & Observer*, and contributes to several publications. Read more at her blog at [www.debbiemoose.com](http://www.debbiemoose.com).

## Resources

**Come to the Table**, a project of the North Carolina Council of Churches: [www.cometothetablenc.org](http://www.cometothetablenc.org) Piedmont Interfaith Network of Gardens: [www.cometothetablenc.org/ping.html](http://www.cometothetablenc.org/ping.html)

**Heifer International**: [www.heifer.org](http://www.heifer.org)

**American Community Garden Association**: <http://communitygarden.org/>

**NC State University Extension Service** community gardens information: <http://www.ces.ncsu.edu/depts/hort/garden/CommunityGarden/index.html>

**Just Eating Curriculum**, a Bible study curriculum on food and justice: [www.pcusa.org/hunger/features/justeating.htm](http://www.pcusa.org/hunger/features/justeating.htm)

**Covenant Community Garden**: [www.covenantcommunitygarden.org](http://www.covenantcommunitygarden.org)

**Anathoth Community Garden**: [www.anathothgarden.org](http://www.anathothgarden.org)

**SEEDS** (South Eastern Efforts Developing Sustainable Spaces, a Durham group working with urban spaces and children: <http://www.seedsnc.org/index.htm>

**The Edible Schoolyard**, starting gardens at public schools: [www.edibleschoolyard.org/homepage.html](http://www.edibleschoolyard.org/homepage.html)

**MIDTOWN FARMERS' MARKET**

Saturdays, April 11 – November 14  
On the Commons at North Hills, 8am – Noon

Presented by:  **Duke Raleigh Hospital**  
DUKE UNIVERSITY HEALTH SYSTEM

**NORTH HILLS**

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