

# Bountiful Harvest

**BY DAWN BAUMGARTNER VAUGHAN : The Herald-Sun**

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Cilantro. Okra. Broccoli. Cabbage. Basil. Peas. Peppers. Squash. Raspberries. Kale. Spinach. Lettuce. Strawberries. Sunflowers. Row after row of bounty.

On a May afternoon, a gentle breeze rustles the leafy greens and purple flowers that rise above the ground from their potato roots.

Little white butterflies flit from plant to plant in a community garden in Cedar Grove.

There's the sound of an occasional vehicle passing by on Mill Creek Road. A dog barks. Birds chirp.

It's peaceful here, in this five acres of garden. Out here in God's country, some might say -- especially since the land was provided by a woman who had a vision to turn this part of Orange County into a fertile place of faith.

Welcome to Anathoth Community Garden, a ministry of Cedar Grove United Methodist Church. It's named for a city mentioned in the Old Testament.

On the blue wooden sign hanging by the road are the instructions in Jeremiah 29:5-7: "Plant gardens and eat what they produce. ... Seek the peace of the city to which you are sent."

Peace is what the church was seeking after a community tragedy three years ago.

A local store owner was shot and killed. The community was scared. Cedar Grove UMC pastor Grace Hackney and community member Valee Taylor organized a prayer vigil.

A few weeks earlier, Hackney, who is white, and Taylor, who is black, met one day at the local post office, next door to the church.

Taylor said he was knocked off his feet with surprise that a white preacher invited him to her church. That had never happened before.

At the vigil, Hackney spoke of how the kingdom of heaven included all souls, black and white. Taylor then knew the answer to his mother's vision.

Taylor's mother, Scenobia, dreamed of providing five acres to a church for a

faith-based purpose. Hackney said the church already had been talking about how to be more responsible for the land, and had an idea for a community garden to bring folks together, teach organic gardening, tend creation and help those in need.

"There's a lot of poverty here in the country," said Valee Taylor. "I can't stand to know that people don't have food to eat. It's a basic necessity."

Scenobia Taylor leased Cedar Grove UMC, which is about two miles from the garden, the property for \$1 for perpetuity as long as the land remains in use for a faith-based mission.

The first garden beds were made last year, the first crop in the ground. Now Anathoth Garden is growing produce for its second season.

Ida Fuller lives up the road from the garden. She passes it every time she comes and goes from her home. She has visited the garden several times.

"I'm on oxygen, short of breath. I'm not young, so I'm unable to participate. They bring me turnip greens -- a little bit of everything. The produce is wonderful," Fuller said.

The garden, she said, also is wonderful for the community.

"Each and everyone can participate if they like. I've met a lot of people. It's real rewarding. Real rewarding. I just love it," she said.

The garden is managed by Fred Bahnson, a 2000 Duke Divinity School graduate. After graduation, the Montana native became interested in agriculture while working with coffee farmers in Mexico.

Now he sees the agrarian way of life more attractive than the consumerist, industrial way of life, he said.

Anathoth is completely organic. No fossil fuels. A compost pile. Push mower. Hand tools. Solar-charged fence to keep away deer. Passive solar greenhouse in the works.

"Out here we see it as being good stewards of God's creation and sharing it with others," Bahnson said.

About 30 people are members of the garden. Membership is aimed at low-income residents but open to anyone, in Orange County or surrounding counties. Members pay \$5 per season, work a few hours a week in the garden and take home bushels of produce.

Rather than each family tending a plot, everyone helps throughout the garden. Other garden workers include Volunteers for Youth, a program that places local youth fulfilling community service hours by working in the garden beds.

"It's pretty magical, what happens there," said John Hughes, a member of Cedar Grove UMC who serves on the garden's board.

It is becoming very multicultural, he said, with blacks, whites, Latinos and others. Church members feel strongly that it is the church's responsibility and calling to reach out as well as provide, Hughes said.

Hackney said the garden ministry has made church an exciting place to be.

"In a day when a lot of things make God weep -- war, global warming -- we're able to see just the goodness of the land and people coming together," she said.

Valee Taylor said some folks questioned why his family would give land to a predominantly white church.

He said he grew up during integration and remembers when the Klan pulled them off buses. But this fulfilled his mother's vision, and the garden has exceeded his family's expectations. It has fed the poor and brought the community together.

"It's time to move on, time to heal. It's a new day," Taylor said.

As a result of the garden, black and white area churches have grown to know each other and exchanged pastors, including Taylor's church, Lee's Chapel Baptist.

"God wanted us to do this," he said.