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Tunnel Hill church nurtures plants, souls

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— TUNNEL HILL — Members of Tunnel Hill United Methodist Church say they aren't just growing a garden. They are growing a fellowship.

"I'll be out here pulling up weeds, and there will be a family here or maybe another individual, and they'll ask me a question about something and we'll start talking about gardening and before you know it we'll have been talking for 10 or 15 minutes and just enjoying ourselves," said Joel Fehd, a retired minister and educator.

Fehd began taking a Master Gardener class through the Whitfield County extension program earlier this year.

"I'd wanted to do it for a while, but I never had the time. I retired from Dalton Public Schools last year, and I finally had the time. It's offered during the daytime when I would usually be working," he said.

As part of the class, Master Gardeners have to volunteer 50 hours in the community to help spread their skills.

"I wanted to do a community garden, so I talked to (Whitfield County extension agent) Brenda Jackson, and she directed me to the American Community Gardening Association website (communitygarden.org), which was also helpful," he said.

Then he brought the idea up at the church, where he is a member, to see if other members might be interested in putting in a garden on a lot of land the church owns next to its parking lot.

"I asked for a show of hands in February or March to see who might be interested. Eight or nine hands went up, so we moved forward. I remembered my mother's advice about vacation. Estimate how much money you'll need and take twice as much. So we put in 20 plots. Some of us are tending two plots," he said.

They broke ground on the garden in March.

Fehd said he was inspired by a fellow church member.

"This land was bought by the church 10 years ago for future expansion. Shortly after that, Bud Griffin, a World War II veteran, planted it in sunflowers. The sunflowers were such a hit in the community. Everyone loved them."

Fehd planted a small sunflower plot near the garden to honor Griffin.

"I did a soil test. That's one of the things the Master Gardener class drilled into us. From the soil test, we found that we needed to add three pounds of fertilizer and six pounds of lime for every plot. We had donations of organic material from Shepherd Mulch," Fehd said.

He says the land didn't have water, so some church members installed a faucet outside the nearby fellowship hall so a garden hose could be hooked up and run to the garden.

As a Master Gardener, Fehd is there to help out the others, especially those who haven't gardened before, but he says all of the members help each other out and trade advice.

Among them, the members seem to be growing every type of vegetable that can be grown in North Georgia. A quick look shows green beans, okra, squash, several types of tomatoes, onions, lettuce, radishes, corn, bell peppers and cucumbers.

Several of the plots contain marigolds, which Fehd said are a natural insect repellent.

His wife Cindy says that even the newest farmers have taken to the garden.

"I had one lady tell me that every time she drives by there's someone out here," she said. "You'll see parents working their plots with their children, and grandparents with their grandchildren."

She says that some families have told her that getting involved with the garden has provided an unexpected benefit.

"The mother of two of those grandchildren I mentioned said that since they've gotten involved in gardening they've been more willing to try vegetables," she said.

Joel Fehd said he grew up gardening.

"My father was an Indiana farm boy who joined the Navy. He farmed around the world. In Rhode Island, he actually rented and ran a dairy farm," Fehd said. "I had my own garden at home but it had become shaded out by trees over the last several years."

Fehd said the church has room to expand the garden if it proves popular enough. He said that might allow others from the community to join in as well.



- Joel Fehd and his wife Cindy look on Wednesday at Christmas lima beans they planted in the community garden at the Tunnel Hill United Methodist Church. (Misty Watson/The Daily Citizen)
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- Bill Watkins, left, helps Ellie Williams plant squash earlier this spring.



- Joel Fehd looks at squash plants on Wednesday in the community garden at the Tunnel Hill United Methodist Church. (Misty Watson/The Daily Citizen)