



GROWING A COMMUNITY

— The saga continues

“I am a big believer ... I read a quote once that stuck with me — ‘Hunger does not exist in strong community.’ When a community is weak and its members are going hungry, something is wrong.”

June Johnson



Maggie Valley community gardens feed, teach, give hope

By **Rachel Robles** | Lifestyles editor

In late March/early April of this year, volunteers in Maggie Valley banded together and embarked on a quest to feed the hungry and provide a sustainable food source for the community.

That effort is being rewarded in the early reaches of summer as the first crops of the first plantings are being harvested.

The garden behind Maggie Valley First Baptist Church is in full swing with an abundance of plants — both vegetable and floral. Zucchini, squash, bell peppers and tomatoes are starting to come in, and volunteers have already been able to pick a handful of early arrivals for the kitchen. Eggplant, basil and green onions are enthusiastically growing alongside several varieties of flowers.

“We planted flowers to attract good bugs, like pollinators, and other flowers to discourage bad bugs,” said June Johnson, a volunteer from Maggie Valley who spends three to four hours every day working in the gardens.

Volunteers have been busy since the groundbreaking in April. Volunteer Larry Hepler and the Maggie Valley Public Works Department erected a sturdy fence around the garden’s perimeter to keep out rabbits, deer and elk. They also built the raised beds and installed the underground irrigation system, and Hepler crafted the decorative arch above the gate and the wooden benches in the garden.

One of the garden’s crowning features is its 300-gallon tank, acquired from M&M Tanks in Canton at cost that pulls water from Jonathan Creek, the stream directly behind the garden and irrigates the plants. Because of its proximity to the creek, the garden is entirely organic.

“We have to be really careful about avoiding using any kind of fertilizer or pesticides,” said Johnson.

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Volunteers have gotten creative in their efforts to keep the garden healthy and pest free without the use of chemicals. Companion planting, for example — planting two or more different plants in the same patch — is thought to be one method to confuse bugs, and chives and horseradish act as natural bug deterrents.

The volunteers have also resorted to good old-fashioned know-how to keep things low cost. For example, the garden hosts numerous tomato plants but not a single tomato trellis. Because they can't afford the \$5 per plant for cages, they use a "Florida weave" or "bean weave" to trellis the plants.

Johnson says it has been a process figuring out what works and what doesn't.

For example, volunteers discovered that rabbits prefer one type

of grape plant over another in the budding vineyard behind Maggie Valley United Methodist Church.

"They won't touch the Concord grapes," said Johnson, "but they ate some of the muscadine grape down to the roots, so we had to put cages around those."

The 80-foot trellis behind Maggie Valley UMC will turn into a bustling vineyard that will be used to make jams and jellies. Adjacent to the vineyard is an 11-acre plot donated by the Henry family that will be turned into an apple and cherry orchard complete with beehives.

But the community garden effort isn't confined to downtown Maggie Valley; residents have donated parts of their land for community use. There's the potato patch behind Ernestine Upchurch's house, adjacent to a breathtaking view of the mountains. This plot will produce thou-

sands of potatoes come harvest time. And the plot of land on the farm of Gwen and Randy Evans in Evans Cove has an abundance of corn, pumpkins and potatoes.

Sustainability

The reason for all of this effort in Maggie Valley is to combat an urgent and growing problem — hunger.

"I am a big believer ... I read a quote once that stuck with me — 'Hunger does not exist in strong community.' When a community is weak and its members are going hungry, something is wrong," said Johnson.

One hundred percent of the fruits and vegetables harvested in the gardens are sent to the kitchens of Maggie Valley First Baptist Church — which feeds 120 to 140 people a week — and Maggie Valley United Methodist Church because both churches have industri-

al size kitchens that can handle the demands of cooking for so many people.

"Maggie Valley is a community of people who have been here since the 1700s and people who have their second homes here," said Johnson. "There is quite a disparity — the part time residents and the full time residents; the very rich and the very poor."

The population grows dramatically from the beginning of summer to mid to late autumn when part-time residents return. It is during winter when the population shrinks back down to approximately 1,000 that things get rough.

"We need a year-round, sustainable food source," said Johnson.

It is her hope that the gardens will provide the kind of sustainability the community



so desperately needs. It is also her dream that the gardens will serve as another resource for the social enterprise efforts marshaling

forward in Haywood County.

"My dream is for the Extension to work with the new homeless shelter and half-way house," said Johnson. "The Master Gardeners would instruct the residents with the raised beds gardens and teach them skills that are marketable to efforts such as ours in Maggie Valley."

And she would love to see those skills rewarded by hiring the residents to work in the gardens.

"We really are growing a community," she said.

Anyone is welcome to work in the gardens and volunteers are always accepted.