

Sow and Reap Garden

Black Creek United Methodist Church Community Garden

MISSION: To serve as many people in the community and surrounding communities as possible, in whatever capacity possible.



Black Creek, North Carolina

County	Wilson
Population	769
Median Household Income	\$34,028
Individuals Below Poverty Level	31.5%
Households in Wilson County Receiving SNAP Benefits	19.59%

Sources: U.S. Census, communitycommons.org

OVERVIEW

Four and a half years ago, before the Black Creek United Methodist Church's community involvement committee decided to start a garden, the only goal was serving the community. After various projects such as kite making and bicycle maintenance, Black Creek UMC put together a survey in partnership with the local college which asked residents of Black Creek what they thought would make the town better. In this survey, the number one response was that [easier access to food would improve Black Creek](#). To remedy this, the Black Creek UMC community involvement committee got the idea for a community garden, and the Sow and Reap Garden was born.

Today, the garden consists of a combination of raised beds and rows. The Sow and Reap Garden grows almost year-round, and they grow everything from peppers and tomatoes to collards and pumpkins. Work hours are held once a week for any community member interested in volunteering. On the day that the produce is harvested, a bright yellow vegetable cart with a flashy "Free Vegetables" banner is set up next to the garden, and anyone can come and take the produce they want. People learn about the garden through word of mouth and from signs throughout the community. On work days, any excess produce not taken off the cart is distributed to nearby food pantries and shelters or delivered directly to community members who can't reach the vegetable stand because of low mobility.

From time to time the vegetable cart also gets donations from other farms or gardens in the community. The Sow and Reap Garden has also begun to work with the Society of St. Andrews to reduce food waste by gleaning fresh crops that would otherwise not be used, and getting that food to individuals who would have not had access to it.

Sometimes community members come on their own to the garden to pick whatever they want, but for some reason it's rarer for people to come on their own to weed the garden, though the garden committee welcomes that help!

Teachable Moments

A common theme that is prevalent for the Sow and Reap Garden committee is the abundance of teachable moments for people of *all ages* in the garden. For many Americans, a disconnect exists between families and their food: They might not know how it's grown, processed, or even cooked. Many children don't experience much practical, hands-on experiences outdoors, especially growing food and then preparing it. A community garden paired with a church kitchen is a great place to teach both kids and adults about where their food comes from, and to join in the harvest and preparation. When one person learns, they can then pass on their knowledge to someone else. At the Sow and Reap Garden, it doesn't matter if someone is 4 or 40, there is always something to learn, and something for everyone to do. In the words of Garden Coordinator Laura Lee, "[The garden does not discriminate upon age](#)".

Why It's Unique

When the Sow and Reap Garden gives away their produce, they don't care who gets it, as long as it will be used. Some feeding ministries require recipients to show ID, fill out applications, or show other forms to prove that they are "truly" needy, or that they live in a certain area. At the Sow and Reap Garden, the only qualification is "if you want fresh vegetables, and you need fresh vegetables for your family, then you can have them".

In a small town that has limited food access with only a Family Dollar Store, Black Creek UMC is in a prime location to host community events and distribute food. There is no public transportation in the area, but the church is within walking distance for many people and sits next to an elementary school and senior center.



"It's a blessing, and it's fun." - Larry



Meaningful Partnerships Make It Work

The most successful ministries do not operate alone. The Black Creek UMC Sow and Reap Garden fosters meaningful partnerships to help their garden serve the community. And by serving their community, they are building community as well!

Local Schools: The Sow and Reap Garden has worked with local elementary schools and daycares, and with a local college. **Students** have been involved in garden days, planting and eventually tasting the harvest. **Barton College** has been an essential partner, providing both volunteers and labor for raised bed construction and gardening, as well as use of the biology department's greenhouse to start seedlings during colder months.

The Town: The Town of Black Creek provides water access, free of charge, for the garden to use anytime they need to irrigate. The Town also provides a list of people in the community who have a high need for healthy food but might not be able to make it to the garden because of limited mobility. With this list, the members of the Sow and Reap Garden can bring produce right to their doors.

Other Local Charities: Some of the main recipients of the garden's produce are nearby shelters and food pantries. The Town of Wilson has a shelter for victims of domestic abuse and a men's homeless shelter that accept produce from the Sow and Reap Garden; fresh vegetables from the garden are greatly appreciated by program participants.

What's Needed for a Ministry Like This

- A supportive community!
- Space to grow
- Gardening or farming knowledge
- Equipment
- Effective ways to distribute produce
- Cold storage*
- **Volunteers**

When starting a community garden, it is important to make sure that there is good land for growing and a clear agreement for land use in place; people who know how to farm or garden; enough hands to help the garden grow; and somewhere for the produce to go where it will be welcomed.

*Before Black Creek UMC got a CoolBot for their garden (an affordable tool to make your own walk-in cooler; for more information on CoolBots check out <https://www.storeitcold.com/>), they had a hard time using or donating their produce before it spoiled. Cold storage is essential to reduce food waste and prolong the shelf life of produce.

The Fruits of Labor

Sometimes it can be hard to know if a ministry is meeting its objectives. Black Creek UMC garden committee members have been blessed with answers to that question.

An Image Change: Years ago, one of the garden committee members heard a comment about how nothing is ever going on at Black Creek UMC and that they were surprised the church was still open. This year, a comment was made about how someone loves to drive by Black Creek UMC because there is always something different going on there. The Sow and Reap Garden has been essential in changing the community's perception of the church as an engaging place and partner.

Many Thanks: A woman in the community who is uninvolved in the garden project has stopped by at least three times to thank the garden committee for what they are doing. She never takes any vegetables, and leaves only praise.

Good Reputation: The Town of Black Creek is getting a new electricity supplier who wants to give a gift of \$400 split between several families in the community to spend on whatever they might need. The company asked the Town who could get the money to those most in need, and the mayor reached out to Black Creek UMC because of their great reputation for community outreach. Black Creek UMC might be a small church compared to others in town, but their outreach efforts have been recognized, creating new opportunities and partnerships.



Visions

In the future, the Black Creek Sow and Reap Garden hopes to increase community participation at the garden. As with many community gardens, recruiting and retaining volunteers to perform garden tasks can be a challenge so this will be a priority focus. Plans are also underway to add fruit such as melons and blueberries to the garden. And to help families with young children engage, they've purchased playground equipment to set up near the growing space.

In their own words: "We ain't done yet. We ain't done yet and I think we're just going to keep getting better". – Richard

Theological Motivation

When asked about the theological motivation behind the Sow and Reap Garden, the garden committee had a few different answers, but first and foremost is their motivation to help people.

As it is written, ⁴*Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.* ⁵*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus . . .*" (Philippians 2:4-5).

Reflection:

1. What is the theological motivation for the work that you do?
2. When have others looked out for your interests?
3. What can you gain from looking out for the interests of others and not just your own?

Additional theological motivation has been identified as Jesus's words to Peter in John 21:17: *"...Feed my sheep"*. While Jesus is speaking about spiritual nourishment rather than temporal, Sow and Reap Garden committee member Richard believes that those two things can go hand in hand. Richard stated that "If you feed somebody's tummy, they're going to be more apt to listen to what you have to say, and open to what you have". In accordance with this, Laura Lee, Garden Coordinator says, "I think we touch those people's lives, not just their tummies".

"As you bless, you are blessed more." – Richard

