
NEWS

Community garden bears fruit OAKVIEW: Neighborhood thrives as residents transform eyesore Residents plan to eat some of their crops, give a portion away Nuisance no more

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May 31, 2002, 12:01 a.m. ET

Oakview Apartments has become a gathering place in the mornings and afternoons where friends and neighbors are working on a community garden.

People ages 4 to 74 are spending time in the 11/2-acre lot behind the housing unit, which was formerly known as Howard Aden Apartments. They have taken an area that was once an eyesore and a nuisance and filled it with rows of squash, green beans, okra, cucumbers, pumpkins, watermelons and flowers. Old beer bottles, broken toys and tons of trash were removed from the site. The community received seeds and supplies donated by local businesses and clubs such as the Master Gardeners, Piedmont Farm and Garden Supply, and Lowe's Home Improvement. It has been about four weeks since the residents planted their first seeds, and now they are beginning to see their first crops. The tomato plants are getting tall, corn stalks are growing and small yellow squash are hanging from plants. "God has given me the strength to do this, so I'm working," said Robert Campbell, a Freemont Street resident. "I planted vegetables that people said they wanted because I believe God will bless me for helping others." Campbell, 42, was stricken with polio as a child and remembers seeing his mother work in their garden outside Chesnee. His condition doesn't stop him from working every day in the garden. He maneuvers around and uses a garden hoe to remove grass. He even crawled around on the

ground removing large chunks of dirt that the tiller didn't chop up to get the site ready for planting. "When the neighborhood association asked for volunteers, I told them that I wanted to help," he said. "People asked what could I do, and then they learned that I could do a lot." Starting a community garden is an idea that was discussed for about four years. Bill McKinney, secretary of the Cleveland Park and Northside Neighborhood Association, attended a conference in Wisconsin where a neighborhood started a similar program. "The garden was used as a way to get people together," he said. "It seemed like a really good idea." McKinney discussed the idea with Sheila Dogan, community development specialist for Stop the Violence, and they decided to start the project this year. A newsletter was sent out asking residents what they thought about having a garden. The response was favorable, and people got involved. Rita Chapman, manager of the apartments, made arrangements with the complex owner to get the land. The group also received a \$250 grant from the Spartanburg Nutrition Council, a nonprofit group that promotes healthy lifestyles. There are now 59 rows planted at 75 feet long. All but three rows have been planted. Oakview residents and others in the neighborhood are working in the garden, including local churches and the city's Urban Youth Corp. They are planning to eat some of their crops and donate some to soup kitchens to help feed the needy. There will be plenty to go around, and a decision hasn't been made on what to do with the final portion. "Some have said that people might steal the crops," said Shirley Miller, Oakview resident and president of the neighborhood association. "We don't mind if people help themselves because it is a community garden." But the residents don't want people destroying the crops. Miller brings her 4 year-old grandchild to the garden to watch her. Chapman gets enjoyment out of seeing the excitement of the children as they watch the plants grow. "It's a really good lesson for the children because many of them have never seen a garden," she said. "I can't wait until the tomatoes are ready because I want to have tomato sandwiches for lunch." Residents seem pleased when they look around at their garden. They said the area was once considered the community bar where illegal activities were conducted. After work began to prepare the site for the garden, residents started envisioning what the lot could become. It was challenging because the site hadn't had much help in 20 years, and the litter

had to be cleaned up. "This was a meeting place for anything that was negative, but people drive by now and see things growing," Dogan said. "The lesson behind it is that a community that cares for itself thrives."

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WANT TO HELP? Residents will be working in the garden over the next several months, and they still need some supplies, including a tiller, spades, garden hoes, rakes, a shed to store tools and baskets to gather crops. To donate, call Sheila Dogan, community development specialist at Stop the Violence, at 577-0699.