



The back yard at The United Church of Christ at The Villages

Summary: The United Church of Christ at The Villages offered the use of their large meadow and well water to a team of Master Gardeners under the University of Florida/Institute of Food and Agricultural Science (UF/IFAS) Sumter County Extension to begin a community garden. In only 10 months the garden is a going concern with 40 plots assigned, a waiting list for future plots, and bountiful crops. This article explains how to build a community garden at a church, and the development timeframe follows at the end of the article. Questions can be addressed to peggyreineking@gmail.com.

The Seeds that Started a Garden

I retired from a health policy job in Washington, DC in November 2013. At about the same time, my partner, Jim, retired from the Illinois EPA. We moved to The Villages, the largest active adult community in the country with over 100,000 mostly retired residents in Sumter County, Florida about 50 miles northwest of Orlando.

I was almost immediately attracted to Sumter County Extension Master Gardener program. Master Gardener programs operate all over the country, and the Sumter County Extension program is managed through the University of Florida Institute for Food and Agricultural Science (UF/IFAS). Because there are so many retirees in Sumter County the Master Gardener program there is very active. There are several reasons this appealed to me. First, after living in mostly northern states, it seemed to me that owning a yard in Florida was like owning a yard on another planet, with year round growth and huge, exotic plants. Jim was concerned about herbicides, pesticides, and fertilizers that run off into the groundwater, and we wanted to become responsible with these. And I also realized that I needed structure to ease into retirement so I quickly signed up for Master Gardener training that consists of 15 weeks of classroom training followed up by a substantial community service commitment. I found the Master Gardener training to be the best practical educational value of my life, and a life changer.

Florida Master Gardeners learn about trees, including palm trees, lawns, flowers, shrubs, bugs, diseases, and the associated chemicals in the hardware store. We also had classes about vegetable gardening in our program delivered by real farmers. The vegetables in their demonstration garden looked huge and perfect in the Florida spring. In conjunction with this we learned about composting, something I had never learned about before.

I was aware that there was no community garden near The Villages, although I had heard of several false and disappointing efforts to start one in the past few years. It was common knowledge that there were plenty of transplanted northern retirees who wanted to have a vegetable garden, but the small manicured yards and restrictive covenants in The Villages don't make for much vegetable gardening.

Jim and I also joined our second United Church of Christ congregation UCC at The Villages (UCC@TV) after our arrival. It currently has just about 200 members that share a 5-year-old church building on the 10 acres they bought just outside of The Villages. The vast majority of members lives in The Villages and is seniors.

On a sunny Sunday in April 2014, I walked out of church and noticed the lovely memory garden that some members, including one Master Gardener, built next to the church. Just beyond that, I saw acres of the church's flat pasture land situated in full sun. I asked the head of the church's building and grounds committee if he thought we might have a community garden there. He probably didn't think I was very serious, but he didn't immediately blow me off either.

I didn't mention that in my professional work I was conditioned to look for matches between the aims of two organizations -- synergies. UF/IFAS affiliated County Extension offices teach science-based gardening and earth-friendly practices to citizens and home owners. Progressive Christian churches, like UCC@TV, are interested in helping to build strong communities, promote social justice, and care for our environment. That morning when I looked at the church's meadow, I saw a match between these two organizations that intersected in an unmet community need.

Getting Buy-In from Stake Holders

Matchmaking between organizations is not easy. Staff members are busy delivering on the organization's existing agenda. Starting new programs is always hard. In this case I was new, and I was counting on people to trust me.

I continued to meet with various individuals and committees at the church to try to interest them in starting a community garden. From the very start I knew that we could not ask the church to finance the garden, even though the start-up costs would not be very high. The church's budget was set. After I made that point, church leaders seemed comfortable in considering the project. Was it feasible to let Master Gardeners develop a fenced garden with raised plots and tap into the church's well water? Does the church see a benefit to being associated with the first community garden near The Villages operating under UF/IFAS principles? Could Master Gardeners use the church building to hold vegetable gardening education programs and attract an even larger community audience? Could we write grants to finance the garden using the church's Tax ID number? Would donations to the garden be tax deductible? Would the church set up firewalled accounts to help us manage the garden's money separate from the churches? Did we need to have gardeners sign liability waivers? The answer to every question was "yes". A few church members could only see extra work and risk, but the church's governing board gave tremendous encouragement to proceed.

I talked with the UF/IFAS Sumter County Extension agent, Jim Davis, who heads up the Master Gardener program in the county. He advised to me to talk with one of the other Master Gardeners, Nick Brown, who operated two small community gardens in rural parts of Sumter County and twenty miles from The Villages. Nick had the required know-how to start a garden from scratch. He came to see the church's site and knew it was good. He met the church's governing board and helped to build their confidence in the project. He was "in". He invited some of the County Extension staff to see the site, and they agreed. The County Extension backed us, and encouraged their Master Gardeners to support the project.

Development Team Makes a Plan

Diane Reynolds is a fellow Master Gardener. She and I carpoled together to Master Gardener classes in early 2014. She listened to my idea about the garden, she liked it, and she lived essentially across the street from the church.

Eventually Diane and I started meeting regularly with Nick Brown at his favorite cafe. We bounced things off of each other to define the scope and model of the garden. We laughed and dreamed and also bickered a bit, and found out our relationships were quite resilient. We started to think about what it would take to bring this garden off, and we gave each other support to work on. The Development Team emerged. It was small, but just the right size.

When the word got out that we were working on a community garden, individuals with specific gardening interests approached us to develop our garden in alignment with their needs. We could have

gone in a dozen different directions. Organics, hydroponics, honey bees, and butterflies were all on the table. This was good fuel for the Development Team discussions and helped us refocus and prioritize our efforts.

In August, 2014 we resolved to build a fenced garden with 40 4'x12' raised plots, extend the church's well water irrigation system down the middle of the garden, and finish the garden with heavy mulch between the beds. We planned to build in two phases, 20 plots in each phase, the first phase in October 2014 and the second phase in January 2015. Any local resident could rent a plot on a first-come, first-served basis – and we welcomed diversity. Gardeners would be free to grow any legal plants using UF/IFAS gardening principles and keep their own produce. It would not be a strictly organic garden. We would encourage gardeners to join in social activities to form a real community. Note that we never had pressure from the church to push a religious or church membership agenda. Indeed, neither Nick nor Diane is a church member, but they feel very comfortable working at the church.

We decided to call the garden North Sumter County Community Garden at UCC at The Villages. We hoped to make it sound like it belonged to the community rather than the church, while acknowledging the location and the church's generosity.

Once the basic garden was built, we knew that there were other garden and community features we could add, but they could come later. We kept to our original plan and scope.

Defining the Required Start-Up Resources

UF/IFAS Sumter County Extension Master Gardeners need to log volunteer hours in order to maintain their credentials. We knew we would get help from them in building the garden. We especially needed the Master Gardeners who are good with saws and drills, and others with the equipment that that can haul soil.

Given our initial work plan, we also knew we had to buy some things, so we needed to project a budget. It was quite simple:

Community Garden Start-Up Budget

Pressure treated 2x6 and 4x4 lumber for 40 beds	\$2000
Galvanized screws	100
Hauling (mileage) for donated soil to fill 40 beds	100
Irrigation extension from the church's well, 3 standpoints, double spigots	1500
Perimeter fence	2100
Garden sign with artist-donated garden logo and sponsors' logos	180
Mulch donated by utility company	0
Total start-up costs for	Just under \$6000

Publicity and Finding the Gardeners

What comes first, the gardeners or the garden? What if we built a garden and no one came?

It's hard to promote something in the idea stage.

We struggled to get the word out on the garden. Certainly the 80 Sumter County Master Gardeners knew about it, but they were also aware that there had been several other unsuccessful attempts to build a community garden near The Villages. We were prohibited by covenants from leafleting neighborhoods in The Villages and immediately next to the church. The postal stations throughout The Villages refused to let us post a flier. We asked garden-related clubs in The Villages to make the announcement, but heard back that they would rather do that when we had something ready to offer.

The Development Team sent press releases to the print newspaper serving The Villages and to the on-line newspaper in July 2014. The on-line paper ran the release and within one week we had 80 people on a waiting list for garden plots. Not surprising, all the responses came from individuals who lived in The Villages.

We started an Early Adopter list, and we started to keep in touch with those individuals on a regular basis to stoke their enthusiasm.

Later when we had our workdays to build the garden, we always notified the local newspapers, including The Villages Daily Sun, The Villages-News, and the Sumter County Times. They sent reporters and photographers. We have had great articles with photographs in all of them, and this keeps the waiting list for plots healthy. We always took plenty of our own photos, and sometimes the newspapers asked us for pictures. We'd love to have more gardener diversity, but we have yet to receive a request for a plot from someone outside The Villages.

Looking for Sponsors and Seed Money

As early as May, 2014 I started to send letters to local merchants asking for sponsorship. I tried to select merchants that may benefit from an association from a community garden. That included hardware stores, hospitals, wealth management companies, construction companies, and restaurants. I received permission from the US/IFAS Sumter County Extension to use the Master Gardener logo in my letters.

Jim Davis notified me of announcements about national grants for which the garden would qualify. I submitted about 5 grants and approached several other foundations that invite RFPs for grants. I had a lot of enthusiasm.

It seems that many local companies receive a lot of requests for funding. Basically there were few responses. We pursued one big construction company fairly aggressively until we reached the

president who let us know his company had commitments to other charities. It was disheartening. On the other hand it is not surprising that businesses are reluctant to sponsor start-up programs without a track record.

Finally, the local Walmart sent us our first check around the middle of September 2014. A church member donated funds for the fence. The UF/IFAS Sumter County Extension Master Gardeners then stepped up and made the defining contribution from their annual plant sale, funding the irrigation extension and lumber for the first 20 plots. Home Depot gave us a deep discount on the lumber and galvanized screws just for asking. By October, we had enough money and confidence to plan our first workday to build the first 20 plots.

We charged our community gardeners \$35 per year to rent their plots. With our 20 first gardeners paying this fee, we had another \$700.

Toward the end of 2014 we appealed to our gardeners for tax deductible contributions. This resulted in about \$200 more.

We submitted a request to the national UCC Neighbors in Need campaign. In December we received this grant that enabled us to buy the lumber for the second 20 plots. We charged this second group of 20 gardeners only \$20 for an 8 month lease for an additional \$400 in income. We wanted all the leases to be timed to renew at the same time each year in September.

Per our plan, we did not have to ask the congregation for any money to get the community garden started.

The Church's Help

The Assistant Treasurer at UCC@TV offered to start accounts for the garden. The Development Team now gives them all the checks and cash received, and any funds from grants and donations. The church pays our bills through the usual check request process.

This is certainly a blessing for the Development Team. We have not had the need to start a bank account, and we know that we can get a report of all of our revenues and expenses on request from the church.

Each gardener or gardener couple must sign a liability waiver, holding the church and the UF/IFAs Sumter County Extension harmless. The church governing board actually approved the wording in the liability waiver that was modeled after another Florida community garden. There are also a number of community garden rules. A copy of the liability waiver (Plot Request Form) and the rules (The Agreement) follow this article. We provide copies of all the signed liability waivers to the church to keep in their files.

Obviously the Development Team is accountable to the church for the garden. There has been considerable discussion about where the garden should fall in the church's structure. It's a new and fairly autonomous project, yet the land and the water belong to the church. At this time UCC@TV is working to define a new Outreach program with a chairperson sitting on the governance committee. Because I am the only church member on the garden Development Team, I will report to the Outreach Chair. There are 4 church members who have garden plots, and we hope they'll help us build community and good will between the gardeners and the church. In time, if the garden begins to self-govern, one of those church member/gardeners may be the representative to the Outreach chair.

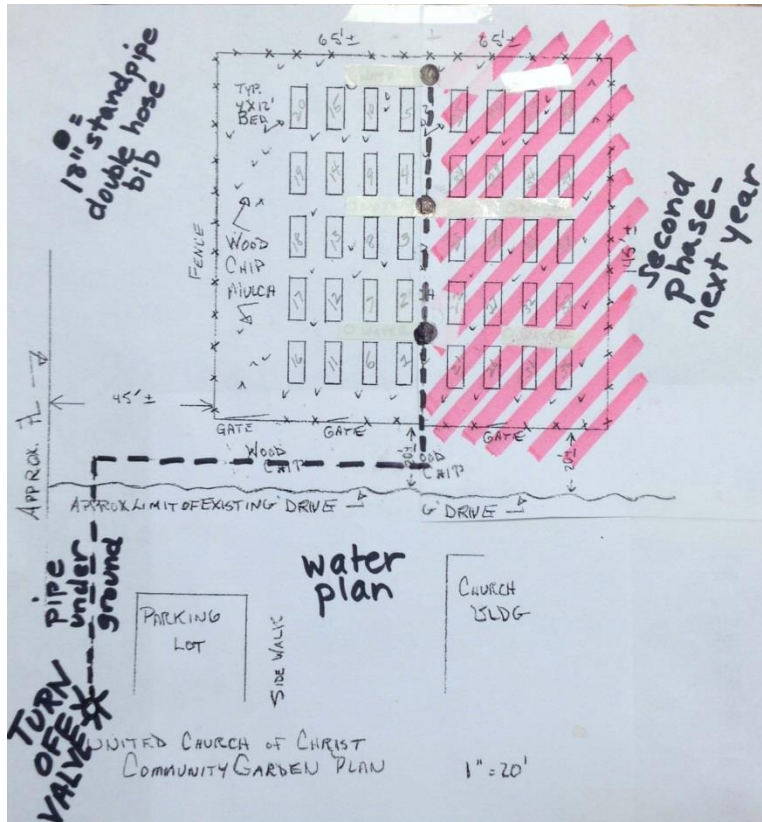
While the church governing board has been supportive, it took some time for them to agree to take the encouragement one step further. The community gardeners and the UF/IFAS Sumter County Extension are now welcomed partners of the church and this represents an official church outreach program. Because of that, when the community gardeners meet socially, or when there is an official vegetable gardening education program at the church, there will be no charge for using the church's facilities.

Building the Garden from Scratch

When the Development Team members were convinced that we had enough money, we announced our first work day. We also asked the first 20 gardeners on our waiting list to get ready to garden. The Development Team, Sumter County Master Gardener volunteers, and these 20 gardeners provided the labor needed to build the garden.

Transporting garden soil is probably one of the biggest challenges we had. The County Extension has a relationship with one of the numerous nurseries in our county, and that nursery generously allow Master Gardeners to take as much slightly used, but still very rich, potting soil as we want. Using a tractor, a volunteer Master Gardener filled 2 large trailers with soil. The trailers were covered with tarps and the trailers were pulled by pick-up trucks the 30 mile round trip to the garden. The pick-ups made several round trips to bring enough soil. Soil was left in piles outside of the garden for use on the workday. We offered the truck drivers money to cover their gasoline expenses.

Before the workday, we needed to do some amateur surveying work. Nick Brown drew up a proposed map plan that included 40 plots, the location for irrigation, and the fence. The church had the meadow mowed, and we were ready to stake out the corners, knowing that the professional fencing company would do a more exacting job of determining the corners. On a hot day in early October 2014 the Development Team went into the meadow to stake out the corners and the rows for the plots.



The garden planning map



Nick Brown stakes out the garden at UCC@TV

As soon as we had the stakes in, we were ready for the church's irrigation contractor to bring water to the garden. The contractor tapped into a church's well system close to the garden and built a conduit to three 4 foot standpipes with double spigots that run down the center of the garden.



One of the 3 irrigation standpipes at the community garden. Pallets prevent mud puddles. Gardeners donated the hoses and nozzles.

We announced the workday, Friday, October 27, a few weeks in advance to the plot holders, and the UF/IFAS Sumter County Extension office announced the workday to the 80 Sumter County Master Gardeners, many of whom needed community garden hours for their credentials. Workers were encouraged to bring cordless drills, shovels, rakes, scissors, and buckets or wheelbarrows. A chain saw proved to be just the right tool for cutting the 2" x 6" and 4" x 4" lumber for the plot frames. Nick Brown ordered pressure treated lumber and hardware, and Home Depot delivered it to the garden early on the workday. We also had weed mat to line the bottoms of the plots.



Pressure treated lumber delivered on site for the garden plot frames

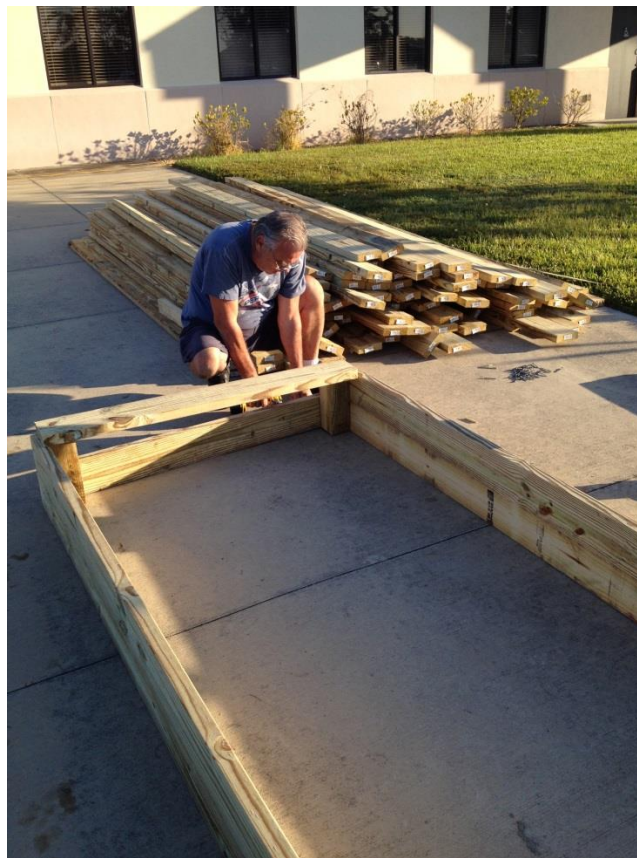


Diane and Maryann cut weed mat to mark the place for a plot frame

Thirty-five workers built the first 20 frames, one-by-one, next to the church, and carried each to its place in the garden. Each frame was so heavy it took about 10 people to carry. Each frame was lined on the bottom with mat, and then filled with soil. The whole process took about 4 hours. Plots were numbered 1-20, and the Development Team assigned a gardener to each plot.



Cutting lumber for garden plot frames



Constructing garden plot frames



Garden frames are held together with 4x4 using galvanized screws



Carrying a finished frame to its place



Filling a garden frame with soil

Some of the gardeners got busy planting immediately. October 27 is, after all, the prime vegetable garden season in Florida for things like lettuce, broccoli, cauliflower, Brussel sprouts, onions, and kale.

Soon after the workday we had a fence professionally installed. The fence is made of 4 foot wooden posts and wire mesh. We bought the best fence we could afford. It includes a walk-through gate and two drive-through gates on opposite corners so that, in the future, we can truck in soil and mulch or other heavy things. The holes in the mesh are not so small – small rabbits could get through, but so far we haven't had any problems with this.



The fence, showing a truck gate



A utility company leaves mountains of free mulch outside the garden on request



Spreading thick mulch between plots

A week after the workday we invited the workers back. A utility company donated and delivered mountains of wood chips that come from the trees and scrubs that they take down in the course of their work. This second workday produced more sweat than the first, and about the only thing we did was spread mulch between the beds. This workday was also 4 hours long.

In retrospect, building 20 beds at a time was very wise. It's a lot of work, and we did not exhaust our volunteers. We wisely waited a few months to build the second batch of plots.

First Fruits

By the end of 2014, the North Sumter County Community Garden UCC at The Villages was beautiful and vegetables were coming home to the dinner table. Twenty gardeners were working the plots and getting to know one another.



Garden produce in early December 2014

The irrigation worked well, but we had plenty of rain. There were occasional days when the thermometer dipped close to freezing, and gardeners were aware and covered their plots.

Individual gardeners brought their own styles. It seems like putting weed mat under the entire bed and up the sides was preferred. Some gardeners added fertilizers. Some arched their frames with strong wire mesh to support the plants and to hold a cover in cold weather. One gardener painted her frame and added a bench at the end. There were scarecrows and support structures added.

The meadow weeds began to peak through the mulch, but we expected that. Mulching will be a continuous effort. Some gardeners like to put newspapers next to their plots and mulch over it to cut down on weeds. The utility company that provides us with mulch offers us a never ending supply, and that's to our benefit.

Building with Experience

Since we had enough funds to build plots 21-40s we decided to hold another workday on January 9, 2015. To get some good press, we invited the newspapers, and several promised to send reporters and photographers. The church was also ready to talk with the press on the workday.



Only half a garden – waiting to add 20 more beds

The first 20 gardeners were contentedly gardening but we still had about 45 people waiting for a garden plot as of January 1, 2015. The Development Team began to call them to commit to one of the next 20 plots. From this we learned that many people will join waiting lists, but not all of them will be ready or interested in gardening when the plots are ready. Busy schedules and hip replacements knocked people off the list. We learned that some people stay on the list until the very last minute and then pull out, and this caused some scrambling. In the end we had 20 more committed gardeners, bringing the total to 40, but 15 people were still on the waiting list. We will always be happy to have a waiting list.

Perhaps there were 50 people who came to help on the second garden workday on January 9th. This included old and new community gardeners and Master Gardeners. This time around we had to work around the new fence so we couldn't construct frames in one place next to the church as we did on the first work day. It was too hard to carry them into the garden and put them in rows. This time we carried lumber to the plot locations and they were built right on the spot where they belong. We saw a lot of gardeners putting their own frames together.



Building the second group of plot frames in place

Because we had plenty of labor, and we all had some experience working together, everyone got busy spreading mulch. A week later we had another workday to finish mulching.



Spreading mulch for weed control will be an on-going process

An artist created a logo for us at no charge. A local sign company made us a beautiful sign that incorporated the garden's logo and the logos of the organizations that gave us financial support.



Our beautiful community garden sign with sponsor logos

One of our community gardeners started a website for us, and there's been no charge for that. As of this time it only shows the logo and offers a telephone number for more information. We intend to add more to the website over time.

The congregation is giving us invaluable assistance with financial management. However, we haven't called on the church to give us money, provide labor, and we've asked for minimal administrative help. This has been a community volunteer effort, and the burden on the church has been minimal. The church is proud of the garden and has shared in the good press. A large number of new faces have been on the church grounds for the workdays, and this certainly has raised the community's awareness of the church and perhaps even its progressive brand of Christianity. The church even has a couple of new members because of the garden.

Sustaining the Community Garden

The North Sumter County Community Garden is now a going concern with 40 active gardeners in addition the Master Gardener Development Team, and there are 16 people waiting for plots. The vast majority of the interpersonal dynamics have been positive.

The Development Team, still consisting of three Master Gardeners, intends to transfer the operations of the garden to the gardeners themselves. The Development Team will continue to guide the planning for at least the next year while volunteers take over the following functions:

- Social events
- Administration and gardener communications
- Garden structural enhancements
- Community vegetable gardening education
- Composting
- Sharing opportunities
- Fund raising/grant writing

- Operations outlook

Our first community pot luck dinner is scheduled. We would like our gardeners to be proud to be in this group, have fun together, be eager to learn from each other, and strive to make this an award winning garden.

The UF/IFAS Sumter County Extension is interested in offering vegetable gardener education at the church. The church is glad to continue welcoming visits by new friends. Having an operating vegetable garden on site will be a great learning laboratory. The Development Team is eager to make this a regular feature.

In early February 2015 the Development Team added compost bins and community gardeners began to contribute. This will be the source of a soil enrichment program.



New compost bins for kitchen scrap contributions from community gardeners

Our gardener-volunteer for Sharing is exploring relationships with local businesses. She is willing to accept donations of materials or funds. In the future she may coordinate bedding plants for plants sales or help with redistribution of excess foods produced.

While reflecting on the rapid development of this garden, the Development Team still meets weekly for planning of feasible goals. We recently added some frames to support tomatoes or other vegetables planted in up-side-down 5-gallon buckets. We have some 50 gallons buckets that can be interspersed with plots to grow crops and make maximal use of the garden space. A few blackberry bushes have been planted along the fence so that the fence can give support. There has been interest in adding fruit trees or grape vines along the fence, and that would be acceptable as long as they don't cast shadows on the gardeners' plots. There is also an interest in adding honeybees at some distance away from the garden, although the church governing board would have to approve this after considering the risk to people with allergies.



Tomatoes can grow in hanging buckets

There is a waiting list for garden plots, and we know that some of our current gardeners would like more than one plot. However we don't have the funds to expand beyond the current 40 plots, and we don't want to overbuild. There is not much vegetable gardening in Florida in the summer months, and we will have to see how the garden fares through that time, and what it will take to prepare it for a new planting season in fall of 2015. By September we will know whether the first 40 gardeners will retain their plots, or whether we'll have some turnover.

This has been a very gratifying project. We would encourage any church that has a few acres in full sun and a well or water source to consider partnering with the local County Extension agents and their Master Gardener volunteers to make a garden happen in their own back yard. Churches can benefit from the positive messages and images and new knowledge and relationships that come from food gardening.



Admiring the fruits of a gardener's labors



Rev. Drew Willard, Pastor at UCC@TV, holds a garden blessing ceremony for community gardeners

**North Sumter County Community Garden at UCC@TV
Development Timeline**

2014	
April	The idea germinates
June	Approval and encouragement from UCC@TV and Sumter County Extension
August	Development Team finalizes plans and budget
October	Funding secured
October 9	Church sets up accounts to manage garden money
October 21	Irrigation extended into the garden
October 27	Workday to build plots 1-20, gardening begins
November 5	Fence built
November 19	Workday to add mulch between 20 beds
December	Crops ready for harvest

2015	
January 9	Workday to build plots 21-40 and mulch between them, gardening begins for new plots
February 2	Composting begins

**North Sumter County Community Garden
At UCC at The Villages Agreement Guidelines**

The UF/IFAS Sumter County Extension Master Gardeners have organized and manage the garden for local residents to lease an individually delineated vegetable plot. The garden is located behind the UCC at 12514 CR 101 Oxford, FL. Each plot will be 4' x 12' with irrigation on site. Fees will be paid at the time of registration and plots will be assigned on a first-come, first served basis. If there are no garden plots available when you apply, your name will be added to the waiting list. Fees will be collected when plots are available.

Each vegetable garden plot will be individually marked and sole maintenance will be the responsibility of the lessee for the period of the lease term. Each lessee is responsible for supplying their own watering hose, rakes, buckets, garden tools, etc. This is a wonderful way to get your family or group together, make new friends with common interests, and grow your own food.

The following guidelines have been established for the community garden:

- Each plot requires a non-refundable lease fee at the prevailing annual rate.
- Plots must have weeds maintained. Plots that are not maintained properly will be given a written warning and have ten (10) days to comply. If the plot has not been cleaned up after that time period, the lease voided, and the plot will be offered to another person on the waiting list.
- Well water will be available by stand pipe and spigot. You will need to bring water to your plot via hose or watering can. Water must be turned off when you are finished drawing what you need.
- Plot holders shall not leave behind any gardening equipment.
- The use of chemical pesticides or herbicides is discouraged, but the garden will adhere to UF/IFAS gardening principles.
- Plot holders will harvest only from their own plots.
- Pets are not allowed in the garden area.
- If children are brought to the garden, they must be closely supervised at all times by an adult who is responsible for the results of their behavior and any damage that may occur.
- Illegal crops are forbidden.
- Gardeners may enter and work in the garden only in daylight hours.
- Cars must not be driven outside of the parking lot. Irrigation pipes under the grass are vulnerable.
- Use of radios, phones, or other electronics that emit sounds must be kept to a minimum while in the garden.
- You may replenish your plot with your own composted materials such as vegetable peels, coffee grounds, egg shells, etc.
- The church's rest rooms are not available to gardeners. Please attend to your needs before you come to the garden.
- There are services at the church on Saturday and Sunday mornings. During these hours, please keep your activities and noise to a level that does not interfere with the services.
- The church will manage garden funds, but they will be kept separate from other church funds. Any donation can be made to the UCC Community Garden Fund and will be tax deductible.
- Gardeners must sign a liability waiver form if required by the church or its insurance carrier.
- Gardeners may not loan or sublet their garden plots to other people.
- These guidelines can be amended by the UF/IFAS Sumter County Extension or the church at any time.

