

Youth Garden in Siler City helping meet many community needs

By Casey Mann

The Community in Schools (CIS) Youth Garden in Siler City serves young people, families, and the community.

The CIS Youth Garden in Siler City began in 2013 to provide a place for community service for juveniles and to raise produce for those who cannot afford it. Prior to that, the organization had a small garden in Pittsboro at the Fairgrounds.

Though Gwen Overturf, Program Coordinator for the CIS Youth Garden, notes that the relationship with the Fairgrounds was a great partnership, transporting young people and equipment between Siler City and Pittsboro became unsustainable.

Overturf notes that the garden was the vision of CIS Executive Director Kim Caraganis to create the garden. In 2013, CIS negotiated an agreement with a local artist, Sue Szary and her husband, to use the vacant lot next to Szary's gallery, Against His Will.

"The original inspiration was a recognition that many people did not have access to fresh fruits and vegetables. We had gotten a grant to improve the health outcomes of women of child bearing age. There was a state-wide election and these funds were pulled, cut, or diverted somewhere else. WE then saw the opportunity to make it a worksite for community service kids in Siler City," Caraganis said.

The garden grows a variety of plants including tomatoes, sweet, white and Peruvian potatoes, onions, garlic, peppers (serrano, banana and jalapeno), melons (musk and sugar babies), sugar snaps and persimmons. There are a variety of herbs including basil, parsley, oregano, chives, mint and dill. The garden

also houses multiple leafy greens such as romaine lettuce, kale, chard, and arugula

"We make a special effort to grow perennials that sport colorful blooms which attract all sorts of pollinators - roses, butterfly bushes, echinacea, coreopsis, cactus, and moon flower," Overturf said.

According to Caraganis, youth, youth who enjoy gardening and simply want to volunteer and adult volunteers help with maintenance, weed eating, seed starting, enriching soil, weeding, pruning, mulching, planting, harvesting produce and herbs.

"I get the rewards and fun of seeing plants which have been started from seed mature to fine, healthy, delicious food. I love working with the youth. Some must work in the garden for their community service commitment and while it may not be their first choice of a fun activity, they are interacting with the soil, its inhabitants, the plants and the pollinators that visit. It's a hands on, sense provoking experience. They can smell, taste and see what plants yield and experience what they feel/look like and how different that experience is compared to seeing them in a store wrapped in styrofoam and plastic wrap. If one allows, the garden experience can transcend the chaos of their lives and center them as they move work at simple chores that put them in direct contact with the living, growing world. When we spot grubs, worms or a large praying mantis it is quite the occasion. And there are always the birds from crows, sparrows, wrens, robins and mockingbirds who visit to feast or collect nesting materials. And then there's the value of old fashioned sweat equity," Overturf



Youth Garden . . .

Yolanda Pantoja, wife of Pastor Daniel Pantoja, pastor at El Camino Methodist Church Siler City, join some young friends at the Community in Schools Youth Garden in Siler City.

said.

The community has been very supportive of the project.

"This past June we had a group of volunteers, several from Chatham Community Church who along a board member and

Mitch Woodward from NC State installed a 2000 gallon cistern that is in the process of being hooked up so that we can water the garden with rainwater off the roof of an adjoining building. We also have a beautiful mosaic bench that was a group art proj-

ect a local artist, Janice Rives," Caraganis said.

Siler City Mayor John Grimes and his wife are donating the roof space for the rainwater collecting cistern.

"This happened with the help of Mitch Woodard, an engineer from NC State. He has been involved with the Town of Siler City's stormwater projects - he donated the cistern, a group of volunteers from Chatham Community Church came and helped with the plumbing part of the installation, another volunteer from that church contributed funds for the Cistern project so we could buy all the parts for installation and operation. It's already full of water - we're just waiting for the electrician to come and get the pump operational," Caraganis said.

"I am so inspired by the beauty of the garden. Most of my efforts go into keeping funds for the continuation of this garden. This garden is not a free standing program - it's a project within a few programs: a work site

for kids (and sometimes adults) having to complete community service hours. And most recently with a new collaborative project we are currently launching with Chatham County Literacy Council called the Learning Institute/ Instituto de Aprendizaje. The garden will provide volunteer opportunities for 20 parents of youth enrolled in our school model program at Chatham Middle School or Virginia Cross Elementary. We plan to offer monthly CSA from it as incentives for program participation. We would love to think of it as an outdoor classroom where students can learn about nature: pollinators, composting, climate change, and storm water collection," Caraganis said.

"This garden has beautified a former vacant lot in the downtown area, given youth an opportunity to learn about where their food comes from, provide much needed fresh fruits and vegetables to the community and be a place people can come and sit and observe the beauty of nature," Caraganis said.

Community college, county join forces to present Citizens' College

Do you want to know more about the Chatham County community you live or work in?

How do its local governments work to carry out important services and programs?

Would you like to earn continuing education credits in the process?

Anyone interested in learning more about county and town government is invited to enroll in Chatham County Citizens' College, offered through Central Carolina

Community College's Continuing Education Program in Pittsboro.

The course is jointly offered by CCCC-Pittsboro and the Chatham County Manager's Office at a very low cost of \$25.

Citizens' College begins on Sept. 21, and will be offered every Thursday night until Nov. 2, from 6:30 to 8:45 pm. Locations will vary across the county, but will include the Justice Center, North Chatham Fire Station and Jordan Lake

Water Treatment Plant.

The main goals are to help participants better understand how major county and town services operate and who manages them; explore options for serving as volunteers to help local governments; get to know key managers and department heads; and interact with other interested residents of all ages and backgrounds.

Topics covered will include county/town administration, elections, water utilities, waste coopera-

tive extension, emergency operations, fire services, law enforcement, planning, court system and education.

Interested people may register for the class by contacting CCCC's Continuing Education Office at 919-545-8044. This is the only place to register.

If anyone is interested in the program and would like assistance covering the \$25 fee, contact Debra Henzey in the County Manager's Office at 919-542-8258.