

The Garden of Concord

An extension ministry of Concord United Methodist Church

MISSION: To share God's creation with our neighbors by providing purpose and produce through garden stewardship.



Graham, North Carolina

County	Alamance
Population	14,153
Median Household Income	\$31,906
Individuals below poverty level	21.9%
Food Deserts in Alamance County	Nine, one of which covers much of Graham, NC

Sources: U.S. Census, communitycommons.org

OVERVIEW

When learning about the Garden of Concord, it might be easier to ask what they *don't* do. From garden days to neighbor nights to selling to local restaurants, the Garden of Concord is the definition of a [community](#) garden.

The Garden of Concord currently consists of 100 beds that organically grow a variety of vegetables, fruits, and flowers. There are a number of different ways in which the grown produce gets distributed, but the three main ways are through [garden membership](#), [Community Supported Agriculture](#) (C.S.A.), and donations to the [Southern Alamance Family Empowerment](#) (S.A.F.E.) food pantry.

To be a member of the garden, you have to pay \$25 per family per year. There are also “garden angels” who can pay for someone who might not be able to afford the fee. Becoming a member means that you (and or your family) will work in the garden at least one hour a week during the growing season, and it gets you as much available produce as you would like!

During an average week, garden hours are held Tuesday mornings and afternoons, Thursday afternoons, and Saturday mornings. Having many options for work hours makes it easy for people to fit garden time into their busy schedules. Working in the garden has many different benefits. Barb Graden, the current Farm Manager at Concord who came to the garden 3 years ago, says: “[I came to the garden for stress relief, to play outside, to get vitamin D, to connect with people, and to get food... but it's more than just the food](#)”.

The Garden of Concord also started selling and donating C.S.A. boxes in 2015, although their recipients know them by the name “Box of Blessings” (B.O.B.'s). The B.O.B.'s go out for three eight-week sessions. Community members can purchase a full share (weekly average of 8-9 produce items) for \$600, or a half share (weekly average of 4-5 produce items) for \$350. People in the community can also apply to get a “sponsored” B.O.B. which they do not have to pay for. The local elementary school social worker sends out sponsored B.O.B. applications with some students, and the applications are available at S.A.F.E. as well. Garden leaders then have a very difficult time of narrowing down the applicants to decide who will receive the 10 sponsored boxes. In total, the Garden of Concord only has 25 B.O.B. recipients a year (combined paid and sponsored). Garden members and staff harvest the produce for the B.O.B.'s on Monday nights and/or Tuesday mornings. They prep, weigh, pack, and pray over the produce boxes on Tuesday mornings. The boxes are then ready for pick up on Tuesday evenings during garden hours. Those who receive a B.O.B. do not normally work in the garden at all, although they are welcome! Each B.O.B. comes with a handout with recipes that use the week's produce, tips on how to store and prepare the produce, and a short blurb about what is going on at the garden.

The third main place for the Garden of Concord to share their produce is at the S.A.F.E. food pantry. The garden donates their fresh food in bulk twice a week when the growing is good.

Why It's Unique

The Garden of Concord [sells produce](#) to three area restaurants through informal partnerships. The sales all depend on what the garden has in excess (garden members, C.S.A. recipients, and the S.A.F.E. food pantry are always prioritized in receiving food). These partnerships are a great way to share the goodness of the garden by getting the freshest, most delicious local food onto the plates of restaurant goers. In addition, it is also a wonderful way to generate revenue which flows back into the garden to help sustain it. The Garden of Concord has never wanted to make a profit, but the money earned supports seeds, soil, electricity, garden repairs, sponsored C.S.A. boxes and other expenses the garden has. Funding is often a challenge for small ministries, so any amount of money made is helpful to offset operation costs.



Though the Garden of Concord's priority is to donate food, purchasing and selling partnerships are essential to help sustain the garden, local businesses, and the economic well-being of the community.

[Share the love!](#) If you are part of a bountiful community garden, check in with your local restaurant owners to see if they are interested in getting some of your wonderful food into their meals.



Outreach, Outreach, and more Outreach

The Garden of Concord does much more than just grow food. They have many different outreach programs they sponsor to better engage and empower the community.

Cooking + Canning Classes: This past year the Garden of Concord held four free cooking and canning classes taught by a local chef and farmer. Farmer Howard Allen demonstrated a simple meal or canning technique for participants, using produce that was harvested and packed in the B.O.B.'s that day.

Tours + Educational Opportunities: The garden is open for free guided tours to daycares, school groups (of all levels), scouting troops, and any other group that is interested. Occasionally, groups from the local hospital and Chamber of Commerce have planned work days at the garden. Former Garden Coordinator Donna Poe has also gone to schools and universities to give presentations on the garden and its practices.

Neighbor Night: The garden hosts "Neighbor Nights" in the local community building a few times a year, which is a big gathering of garden members, community members, church members, people who go to S.A.F.E., really anyone who wants to join. The night is not about gardening or even food, but more about getting to know your neighbors and empowering people. Attendees discuss in both large and small groups things they would like to see done in the garden and the community at large, as well as who in the community has the gifts and tools that could help make it happen.

Kidz Thyme: On Tuesday evening during garden hours and B.O.B. pick up, there is Kidz Thyme, which is a free activity period for kids whose parents are working in the garden or picking up their B.O.B. They provide a healthy snack and an activity or craft about gardening or farming. They might also work in the garden on a simple activity such as planting corn or grass seed.

Bible Studies: Most summers, the Garden of Concord and Concord UMC host interns from Duke Divinity School. These interns get together and create a Bible study relating to faith and food, which is open to the public and takes place for four to six weeks.

The Garden of Concord has also hosted [Pizza Nights](#) in their outdoor brick pizza oven, an annual [Harvest Celebration](#) dinner, and a [Wake Up the Garden](#) event at the beginning of the growing season.

Inspiration and Visions for the Future

The Garden of Concord began nine years ago after Donna Poe—new church member at Concord UMC and a new Christian—attended a workshop at Anathoth Community Garden and Farm in Cedar Grove to take notes on faith-based community gardening. Concord UMC had been talking about starting a community garden for years, and Donna was inspired by what she learned and saw at the workshop. Donna had no gardening experience whatsoever but ended up spearheading the garden initiative at Concord UMC.



A garden that began with 16 beds now has 100. A handful of church members started the garden, and now around 70 families are involved, most of them non-church members from the community. What started as giving away produce has now transformed into sponsoring and selling C.S.A.s, selling to local restaurants, and hosting community events. In a county full of food deserts and a declining number of farms, a community garden with a reach like the Garden of Concord is significant in helping reduce food insecurity as well as building community and supporting the local food economy.

As far as planting beds, the garden has reached their capacity due to property lines. Visions for the garden's future include more collaboration with local farms and planting an orchard on a slope next to the garden. Their biggest goal is becoming a full-fledged non-profit, a goal for which they have already begun taking the necessary steps.

As Donna Poe says, *"The sky's the limit when God's involved"*.

Scriptural Reminders

In addition to the overarching goal of empowering others through sharing God’s love, there are two important theological motivations at the Garden of Concord. One is part of Psalm 34:8, “...taste and see that the LORD is good...”, which encourages them to grow and enjoy the best food possible. The other is God’s repeated affirmation during the creation in Genesis that “God saw that it was good”, which inspired the Garden of Concord’s motto, *It Will be Good!*

While the religious members of the garden do not hide their faith, there is no goal of getting people into the pews on Sunday. The garden is inclusive to all, and mindful that not everyone is aware of the presence of God in their lives. There is no preaching that takes place in the garden. At the Garden of Concord, Donna Poe believes that “it’s all about planting seeds”, both literally and figuratively! Donna always loves when she hears people in the garden say things like “There’s just something about this place, I don’t know what it is, there’s something special here”, or “This place just gives me such a happy feeling”, because she knows where that’s coming from.

“We seek to continue to share God’s love, to as many as possible, with the limited space that we have... The heart of our garden, I believe, next to God, is the volunteers”. – Donna Poe

