

Compost for the kingdom: An experiment in gardening

by [Fred Bahnson](#) in the [September 5, 2006](#) issue

Adela and I were hauling water for the first spring crops—peas, potatoes, spinach and lettuce. With five-gallon buckets in each hand we headed down to the creek, dipped our buckets, hauled them back up the hill, then handed them off to another crew.

Adela handed off her buckets with a smile, and we talked—she in rapid Mexican Spanish, me in halting gringo Spanglish. She told me about the years she worked in the tobacco fields. We rested. Then we went back to work.

Adela is one of 20 founding members of Anathoth Community Garden, an experiment in church-supported organic agriculture. The idea is simple: members pay \$5 a year, donate two hours of their time a week and agree to work at whatever needs doing. In return, they receive a share of the weekly harvest—everything from arugula to Zapotec tomatoes—from March through November.

We grow food without harmful fertilizers or chemicals. We've built our raised beds by hand, and do nearly all the tasks—carting manure, weeding, planting—with hand tools. This decreases our dependence on the oil economy and provides us with exercise. We prefer the scythe to the weed-whacker, and return the energy taken from the soil in the form of vegetables back to the soil as compost. We keep the soil, as Sir Albert Howard says, "in good heart." Our goal is to make Anathoth Community Garden sustainable in its most basic sense, meaning it will operate almost entirely by the work of sunlight and human hands.

The garden began with the murder of Bill King in 2003. Bill, a white man whose wife was black, was shot at his bait and tackle shop, and many thought the murder was racially motivated. The uneasy truce between blacks and whites in this small farming community seemed ready to snap. Blame was cast, and some people wanted revenge. Grace Hackney, pastor of Cedar Grove United Methodist Church, organized a prayer vigil that drew 100 residents of both races.

Then, in 2005, Hackney initiated a series of community conversations (Faith-Food-Farm) that addressed the economic injustices that lay behind racial tensions. We have land, she said, yet the poor are hungry. Why not share the produce of a garden with those who need it? A descendant of a sharecropper donated five acres of land to Cedar Grove UMC, and Anathoth Community Garden was born. I was hired as the garden manager.

White, middle-class Christians live comfortably in Cedar Grove, but within a five-mile radius there are at least 20 families without indoor plumbing. North Carolina has one of the fastest-growing Latino migrant worker populations in the country. Many of them were driven from their farms by falling corn and coffee prices, due in large part to economic trade policies like NAFTA. We've invited these landless farmers to grow food at Anathoth.

In the book of Jeremiah, planting gardens and seeking peace are symbiotic practices, exactly the kind of "companion planting" the church should be doing. For Christians, the way we eat represents our most profound engagement with each other. Sharing a meal of Yukon Gold potatoes and Swiss chard that you've grown with your neighbor is an extension of the Lord's Table.

Last November we broke ground, built two beds and planted two fall crops: garlic and blueberries. This spring we've built more beds and planted corn, potatoes, peas, peppers, tomatoes. The garden is a host site for Volunteers for Youth; we take from ten to 15 kids with community service hours to fulfill and put them to work. This summer we also have a seminary intern, and we have plans for a prison ministry and an apprenticeship program with a theological focus.

For the most part, the work has gone smoothly, but down the road from Anathoth live several known crack dealers. We're close to the site of Bill's murder. The killer was never apprehended; he or she may well have set foot in Anathoth Community Garden. But while some of us hang on to doubts—*Why build a garden where crack dealers live? How will you deal with the bugs if you don't spray pesticides? What if people steal your vegetables?*—others see that God is up to something here. Dennis, who recently became a member of Anathoth, said, "I've been waiting to see something like this for 30 years. If a church is doing a community garden where blacks and whites and Latinos grow food together, I want to be involved."

A new well now pumps a whopping 62 gallons a minute—more than enough to irrigate our two-acre garden even in severe drought. But I miss carrying buckets of water from the creek. There was something elemental about irrigating by hand. It connected us to farmers around the world who don't have electricity, who have watered their crops this way for centuries. And the work of hauling gave me a feeling of wholeness that's missing when I turn on the hydrant. The task reminded me of the simple dignity of manual labor.

I remember something Adela said back on that spring day when we were hauling water. On our umpteenth trip back up the hill, when my back muscles were beyond tired, I put down my buckets. I was ready to quit.

El trabajo es bien duro, no? "The work is hard, isn't it?" I asked Adela.

Si, pero es bonito trabajar. "Yes," she said, grinning, "but it's a beautiful thing to work."