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## Community gardening project blossoms in city

By BRIDGET SMITH  
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Clergy and parishioners from five Camden churches celebrated the spring harvest with a barbecue at the Camden Children's Garden on Sunday afternoon.

They were also celebrating the success of several community gardens started under the Faith-Based Community Gardening Program last December.

"It means a lot to the community," said the Rev. Floyd White, pastor of the Woodland Avenue Presbyterian Church, which runs two gardens in the city. "It's a total collaboration of the entire community."

The program is a joint effort between the churches, the Camden City Garden Club and the Camden Children's Garden. It's funded by a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and aims to reduce childhood obesity.

It teaches city residents how to grow their own vegetables and fruit, and offers workshops throughout the year to enhance that knowledge, said Mike Devlin, executive director of the Children's Garden.

Devlin said 24 new gardens have opened in the last year, 18 of which are part of the faith-based initiative.

Jasmine Hall Ratliff, a representative from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, said the organization is committed to fighting childhood obesity and often awards grants for organizations that advocate healthy eating.

The foundation gave a grant to the Camden garden program because of its mission to provide food to members of the community and teach children about gardening and healthy eating.

"We thought it was fantastic," she said. "We were excited about it."

The gardens provide food for the community, as well as a positive project for some of the city's youngest residents.

The program has turned 10-year-old Ruben Wilmer into a full-fledged gardener in a few short months.

"It's something that's good for me to do instead of just sitting around my house," he said.

His family's small plot, inside one of the community gardens run by Woodland Avenue Presbyterian, contains cabbage, lettuce, tomatoes, carrots and a variety of peppers, among summer favorites.

"My favorite is the lettuce," said Ruben. "I put it on everything."

Luis and Martha Checo, of the city's Cramer Hill section, said the project has given their 9-year-old

son, Alex, a chance to bond with his 89-year-old grandfather.

"He loves coming here," said Luis Checo, as Alex perused several flats of nearby tomato plants.

That's how the family's garden started -- with a small tomato plant Alex brought home from a school trip. Now, they have their own plot inside a community garden at 29th Street and River Road.

In all, five churches were invited to Sunday's festivities. In addition to the Woodland Avenue church, members attended from the Genesis Church of God in Christ Church; Mount Ararat Pentecostal Church; Bridge of Peace Church and Centerville Ministries.

City Councilman William Spearman said the gardens help the city's residents -- especially children -- build a sense of ownership and responsibility for the communities where they live.

"It's a real accomplishment," he said. "Sometimes, in the inner city, kids need something like this to build their self-esteem. It's another positive outlet for them."

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Chalia Cook (left), Shaquana Rogers (center) and Cameron Rogers play during Sunday's barbecue.