

### **FriEDENS...an amazing Garden Story**

A few weeks after lockdown in the spring of 2020, I called a neighbor in town who had a garden in her front yard. It's Shartlesville, and the PA Dutch are used to their yards looking \*just so,\* so I knew this was a brave woman who loved gardening vegetables more than public opinion. I also knew she didn't have room for pumpkins in her small yard, so I called and proposed we plant some viney crops up on our church property. She agreed, and even had the seeds, gardening skills, and ideas, so after consultation with council, the garden was born. We sent our crop to the neighboring UCC congregation's food pantry, and with the excess had physically-distant free produce give-aways.

In 2021, we expanded the garden by half, to about 50 by 75 feet. We watered each plant via a recycled gallon milk jug with a pin prick in the bottom. The plants were happy, but our backs were not. It took 45 minutes to an hour to water all the jugs, which we did nearly every day because the garden is in full sun. The black plastic we used for weed suppression became a slip and slide while we irrigated. I joined a cohort through Plainsong Farm for ministry leaders who were developing farm- or land-based ministries and realized it could be worth asking the Synod to support our endeavor. We applied for and received a Witness & Service grant funded through congregational Mission Support giving.

In 2022, we were able to install a drip irrigation system that did not require filling milk jugs and weed suppression fabric that was not slippery. The fabric required using a blow torch to make holes for planting but will be able to be used for multiple years. The irrigation only required turning on the spigot and letting it run for several hours, which was a true God-send because we had some unexpected health issues on the garden team that limited our volunteer force! It was an extraordinarily dry summer, so the grant came just in time.

This past summer we had 21 people volunteer in the garden, took produce to 5 food pantries or senior centers, including Cafe Esperanza in Reading, and welcomed 29 people into the garden at a joint VBS. Not only are we feeding our neighbors with free, fresh, pesticide-free produce, we are getting to know our neighbors, developing new connections in the congregation among volunteers, teaching children about food insecurity and the joy of gardening, and passing on agricultural wisdom. The Hebrew word "Eden" means delight, and our garden is a place where we encounter the beauty of flowers, delight in the smell of herbs, and snack on sun-ripened cherry tomatoes while we work. In the garden of FriEDENS, we remember God is generous and are inspired to pass on that generosity by serving others. To view the amazing photos, click on the link below.

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/15aKLZ7PfsqGNVAKsd5QQHubJjcR-YUMK?usp=sharing>

Submitted by Pastor Inge Williams