



CATAWBA COUNTY

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VOLUNTEER GARDENERS PROVIDE FRESH PRODUCE FOR MEALS ON WHEELS RECIPIENTS

HICKORY, N.C. — Catawba County's Meals on Wheels participants are receiving free, fresh produce this summer, thanks to a volunteer gardening effort.

The HOPE (Helping Our People Eat) Gardens were the idea of Christine Cofer, an employee in Catawba County's Finance Department. She had grown up on a farm and decided to grow a home garden a few years ago. As the Great Recession deepened, she wondered why volunteers couldn't grow vegetables to help feed local people in need.

Cofer knew the county owned several suitable tracts of land, so she asked if she could grow vegetables for local charities on some of those plots. In 2010, the county government and county schools agreed to lease her two garden spots for \$1 a year.

Cofer has used her personal time and vacation to organize and run the project. She raised donations for plants and seeds, and recruited volunteers to tend the gardens. The first year, the gardens produced 1,000 pounds of vegetables. This year, a third HOPE Garden has been added. In all, the three gardens cover less than three acres. Cofer said she is on track to reach her goal of raising and donating 2,000 pounds of vegetables.



(Left to right): Amanda Munden, Social Worker, Catawba County Senior Nutrition Services; Logan Franklin, Teen Up camp participant; Eric Clark, Teen Up facilitator; Logan Bolick, Erik Pennycuff, Kaylon Springs and Christian Newburn, Teen Up camp participants; Christine Cofer, leader of the HOPE Gardens project. Not pictured: Roger Crooks, an elementary school social worker who works with the Teen Up summer program.

In 2010, the produce was donated to groups such as the Eastern Catawba County Cooperative Christian Ministries, Hickory Soup Kitchen and the Corner Table soup kitchen in Newton.

This year, Catawba County Meals on Wheels, operated by Catawba County Social Services, has joined the effort. Employees of the county's Senior Nutrition Program are volunteering in the gardens on their own time. In addition, the residents of a county boys' home have volunteered, as well as members of the Teen Up summer camp program, which is operated by Catawba County Social Services. Members of the Connections clubhouse program operated by Catawba Valley Behavioral Healthcare have also volunteered.

Cofer explained that people in need are also welcome to volunteer a few hours in exchange for a bag of vegetables.

For more information about how you can volunteer or donate to the HOPE Gardens project, contact Christine Cofer at 828-312-8298 or email ccofer51@yahoo.com.