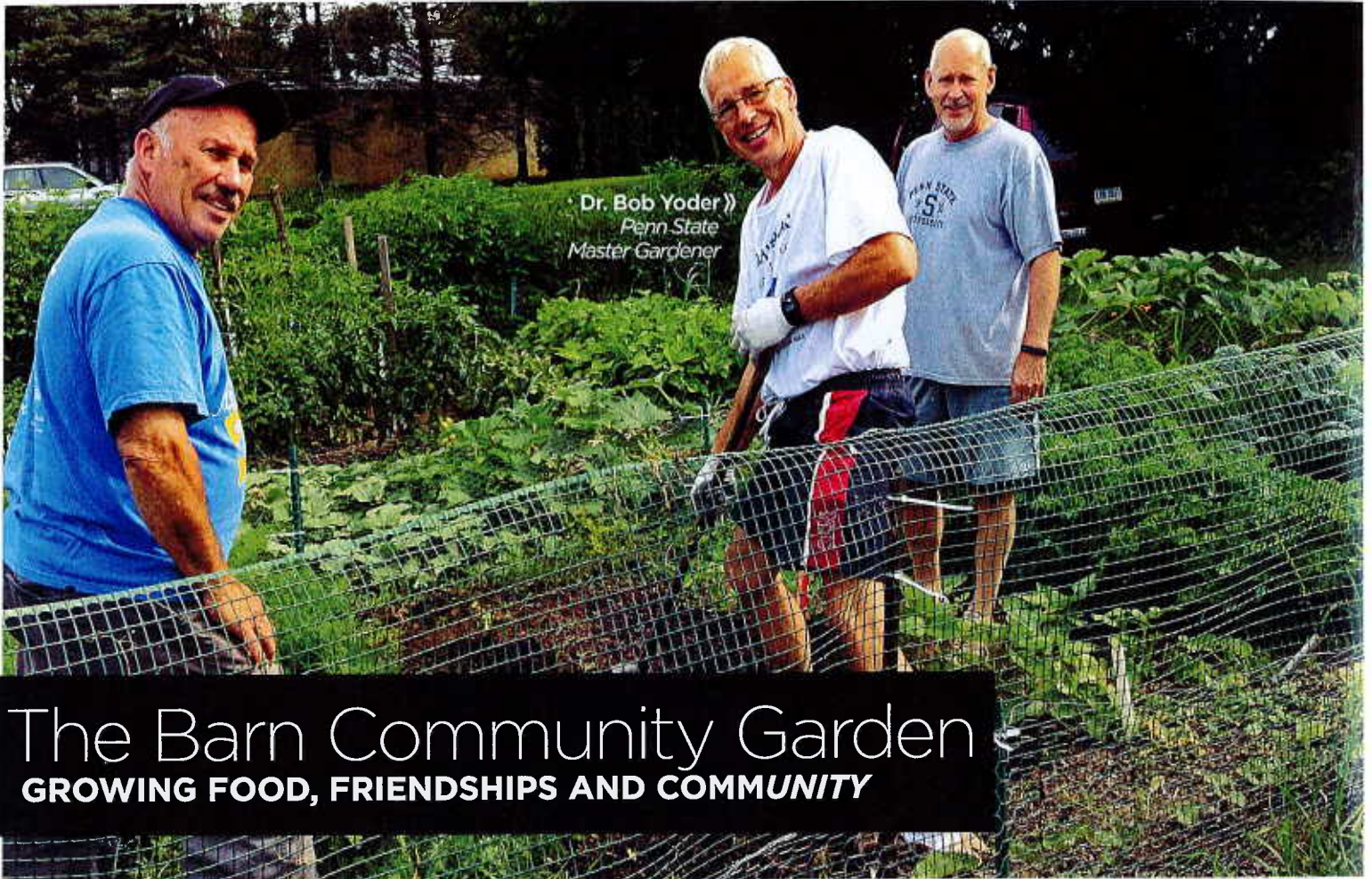


# CHARITY SPOTLIGHT

MAKING THE VALLEY A BETTER PLACE



## The Barn Community Garden GROWING FOOD, FRIENDSHIPS AND COMMUNITY

BY JOSHUA HERRING

**There's no denying** that a gradual disintegration of a sense of community is occurring in today's society—exacerbated by digital distractions and isolated communication. Nevertheless, one visionary in the Valley avows that with a little effort and a lot of outreach, people can come together regardless of modern social tendencies, race, religion or class distinction and cultivate community bonds that go beyond Facebook likes and courteous retweets. Bob Yoder, a Penn State Master Gardener, retired dentist and longtime humanitarian, managed to accomplish such a feat. It all started with a plot of land and a few helping hands.

The fundamental inspiration for this undertaking is, according to Yoder, "gardening as a means to build 'unity' in our 'CommUnity.'" As a certified Master Gardener, he dreamed of combining his skill set with the willingness of a few volunteers he could count on: the faith community at The Barn Christian Fellowship, where his wife, Sue

Pizor Yoder, serves as head pastor at the Swain School. Roughly seven years ago, after spending six years as a missionary dentist traveling back and forth to Honduras and offering aid in rebuilding homes after Hurricane Katrina, Yoder completed 50 hours of required volunteer service to solidify his title as Master Gardener. Subsequently, Lower Macungie Township generously donated a half plot of fertile land to him. His immediate thoughts fixated on using the plot as a means to do social good in the Lehigh Valley community. He says, "When one contemplates homelessness, veteran re-entry, food insufficiency—particularly among children—and mental health challenges in the Lehigh Valley, it's important, for those who are able, to become engaged as positive agents of social change." Thus, he pioneered The Barn Community Garden.

Today, the pride and astonishment at what his community service project has achieved is clear in his voice. In just the first year of operation,

Yoder managed, with the help of three additional Master Gardeners and over 40 volunteers from The Barn, to grow a little over 500 pounds of produce. His objective, to "create a community garden that intentionally brought people together to grow food for the hungry in our community," quickly became fulfilled. Yet Yoder says that, more importantly, he saw "friendships develop, fun ensuing and something bigger than ourselves."

Soon, news of The Barn Community Garden's success rang through the Valley's faith and philanthropic communities, which resulted in

**"When one contemplates homelessness...in the Lehigh Valley, it's important, for those who are able, to become engaged as positive agents of social change."**

## CHARITY SPOTLIGHT

widespread support. Lower Macungie Township donated more land, now equaling two plots at the original site on Bogie Avenue and two more at the Camp Olympic gardens off Cedar Crest Boulevard. Yoder, fellow Master Gardeners and his administrative team headed by Paula Weiant reached out to other ministries, including the Muslim Association of the Lehigh Valley in Whitehall, which donated yet another plot of land. Lutheran and Master Gardener Joe Vincent says he was inspired by the notion of “bringing people together of different religions to do something productive.” Yoder thinks this is something to celebrate. He says, “You know you have struck a beautiful chord when in one hand you have the day’s harvest and in the other you are hugging a newfound friend who comes from a completely different life situation than yourself.”

---

**Encouraged by Yoder, recipients of the crops harvested—at both Daybreak and the St. Paul’s soup kitchen—now actively volunteer in the very gardening that benefits them.**

---

Also motivated by this idea, other faith organizations are following suit and rousing volunteers, like Congregation Keneseth Israel and Muhlenberg Hillel. According to Yoder, proposals for a plot at Temple Beth El in South Whitehall and at Life Church in Lower Nazareth are under way, all contingent on increasing the volunteer pool even more, which lessens throughout the growing season because of scheduling conflicts.

Still, there is now a community being built, according to Yoder, both in the garden and in reaching the urban center of Allentown. Each year, crop yields are donated to Daybreak, a self-sufficiency and prevention program, and the St. Paul’s soup kitchen at 8<sup>th</sup> and Walnut Streets in Allentown, both public outreach programs of the Lehigh Conference of Churches. And in a growing community, there’s a give and a take. Encouraged by Yoder, recipients of the crops harvested—at both Daybreak and the St. Paul’s soup kitchen—now actively volunteer in the very gardening that benefits them.

The Barn Community Garden focuses its efforts on a particular charitable goal every year, with last year’s aimed to promote religious diversity: “Muslims, Christians and Jews all worked together in the gardens to show the world a way to build bridges moving forward,” says Yoder. The volunteer work of 2015 produced almost 3,000 pounds of fresh produce from the current five



garden plots, an immense improvement since the beginning. This spring, Yoder says The Barn Community Garden plans to grow flowers for hospital patients, begin fruit production and, of utmost importance, reach out to involve veterans in the Valley who may be combating a sense of hopelessness. He is optimistic that “the community garden can offer them a supportive community and a renewed purpose.”

---

**The volunteer work of 2015 produced almost 3,000 pounds of fresh produce...**

---

In the off-season, Yoder met with various organizations in an attempt to increase a volunteer base; an additional 80 volunteers later, he is still out promoting and seeking help, focusing his efforts on the Lehigh Valley Military Affairs Council. Over the past few years, The Barn Community Garden’s story of invigorating the “unity” in “community” has motivated a myriad of financial backers, including Home Depot, Tractor Supply, Emmaus Borough, Wal-Mart, Lower Macungie Township and the Master Gardeners of the Lehigh Valley.

“We have indeed grown CommUnity, and the forecast for this year’s growing season is one full of love and care,” Yoder says. To offer your support or to express interest in volunteering with The Barn Community Garden, contact the administrators at The Barn Christian Fellowship or visit their Facebook page.

682 N. Brookside Rd., Suite B2, Allentown  
484.221.8856 | [thebarnlv.org](http://thebarnlv.org) 