

# Master Gardener Irma Jackson

## *Shares Love of Gardening with Children*

By Judie Holcomb-Pack

Irma Jackson didn't come to love gardening naturally. Her parents had a garden and since she was the youngest and "closest to the ground," she was given the job of "seed dropper." Spending summers with her grandparents, she often helped them tend their garden, picking beans and berries. To Irma, gardening was something to "dabble in," but she was not enthralled with doing a lot of it.

After high school, Irma went to Bennett College where she earned a degree in biology and taught high school biology. She also earned a master's degree in educational supervision with a minor in biology, but had no interest to being a botanist. Irma explains, "I don't care what a plant's Latin name is or where they come from. I just like to dabble and play in dirt."

When she moved to a house with space in the yard, she decided to plant a garden. It gave her an excuse to play in the dirt and she enjoyed eating the fresh vegetables. Still, she considered herself a "dabbler," not a gardener.

Irma began volunteering at her grandson's school, Diggs-Latham, when he was in pre-K and decided to start a community garden at the school. In the beginning, she was a committee of one. A few teachers, parents and students would drop by and help on occasion, but no one stayed long-term. Determined, Irma was not ready to give up on her idea of a garden where children could learn about growing things.

It was hard in the beginning because when the soil was first turned, it was discovered that building debris had been buried where the garden was to be. As the soil was tilled, often rocks, bricks and other items turned up, making it difficult to prepare for planting. But Irma was not deterred. She applied for a grant from the Whole Foods Foundation and



*Tilling the garden.*



*Irma Jackson with children in the garden.*

received \$2,000 to help purchase a much-needed tiller. Her first plants were donated lettuce that was too wilted to sell. Through people she met at Old Salem who were starting a children's garden, she learned about seed collections and helped to launch the Homowo seed collection project, which collects seeds primarily from Africa or with African-American roots.

Her grandson is now grown, but Irma continues to maintain the community garden. Some of the produce from the garden goes into the school's Backpack Program to feed hungry children. The garden has yielded strawberries, cherry tomatoes, carrots, peanuts, asparagus, and even green cotton. Although green cotton isn't a food, it teaches children what cotton looks like before it is cleaned, spun and woven into cloth.

One reason Irma has continued with the community garden is so children can learn where their food comes from. If children are exposed to gardening at a young age, they may continue to garden as adults. It is a natural, peaceful place where

children can be who they are. Gardening can be used to teach students about math, science, history, physical fitness, art, and relationships as they work in the garden with others.

Becoming a Master Gardener was never part of Irma's plan. A friend who was taking the Master Gardening class through the NC Agricultural Extension Agency asked Irma to come with her. Since she happened to have some free time, she took the class, became a Master Gardener, and recently was honored as the Agricultural Volunteer of the Year.

For someone who insists that she is just a "dabbler who likes to play," Irma Jackson has made an outstanding contribution to our community and especially to many young people. Through this simple community garden, she is teaching children valuable lessons about growing their own food, creating a strong foundation for a healthy future.