

Growing Future Stewards: The Junior G's at Carver Peace Gardens (published 2026-12-19)
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At Carver Park in Johnson City, the soil has functioned as a classroom for nearly two decades. The Junior G's program, run by the Northeast Tennessee Master Gardener Association (NETMGA), uses the Carver Peace Gardens to teach hands-on science. While the current focus is on raised beds, the project actually began with in-ground gardening in 2006. In spring 2026, a partnership with East Tennessee State University (ETSU) is expanding the garden's capacity to feed the neighborhood through an initiative called the Rooted Alliance.

The Evolution of the Garden

The garden underwent a major structural change in 2016. Nancy Rutledge secured an initial grant for 15 raised beds, moving the project away from traditional in-ground rows. Herb Greenlee, the supervisor of Carver Park and Recreation for nearly 40 years, oversaw this transition alongside the Master Gardeners. The goal was to create a more manageable community food garden where produce could be grown specifically for local distribution. Initially, the vegetables generated by these beds were distributed to Good Samaritan, Jeremiah House, and Watauga Square in Johnson City. This established the garden not just as a hobby site, but as a local food source for residents in need.

Training Future Gardeners

Janet Smith and a team of Master Gardener volunteers currently manage the Junior G's program. It hosts between 30 and 40 children during the school year and nearly 90 during the summer. Students spend an hour each week managing soil and identifying pollinators like the Zebra Swallowtail butterfly.

The garden footprint includes seven dedicated 4x4 raised beds and a cold frame. The curriculum avoids generic plant facts, focusing instead on composting, recycling, and the role of beneficial insects in a closed ecosystem. Small groups—typically one volunteer for every six children—ensure that every student handles tools and works the soil directly.

The ETSU Partnership: Rooted Alliance

The latest expansion involves a grant-funded project with the ETSU College of Public Health. Dr. Chris Honeycutt, a professor in the public health program, works with students and Master Gardeners to link university research with community needs. A student in the program secured the funding for the Rooted Alliance to grow and donate fresh food.

As part of this partnership, Carver Peace Gardens is receiving at least ten new 4x8 raised beds. ETSU students work alongside the Junior G's to develop reliable methods for growing and harvesting. This collaboration shows the children that their labor has a direct impact on the health of their community.

Sustaining the Operation

The garden relies on over 200 volunteer hours annually to remain functional as an organic demonstration site. Without the labor provided by NETMGA members, the program could not offer the individual mentorship required to manage so many students. For the volunteers, the

work is about building a sense of pride and a long-term interest in gardening within the next generation of Johnson City residents. The program ensures that these students remain connected to the land while providing a model for how parks, volunteer associations, and universities can coordinate local food systems.

Resources:

Northeast Tennessee Master Gardener Association - Carver Peace Gardens Project, <https://www.netmga.net/projects-and-photo-gallery/carver-peace-gardens/>

Johnson City Schools - Herb Greenlee Profile, <https://www.jcschools.org/community/hall-of-fame/herb-greenlee>

ETSU College of Public Health - Faculty and Project Records, <https://www.etsu.edu/cph/>

City of Johnson City - Carver Recreation Center History, https://www.johnsoncitytn.org/business_detail_T5_R36.php

How do I ask a question?

If you have questions for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.