

Cleveland's Buckeye-Woodhill neighborhood debuts community garden to promote gathering, education



Former educator and First Lady of Calvary Hill Church of God in Christ Pastor Ernest Fields turns on the built-in irrigation and sprinkler system at the Woodhill Community Garden on Friday, June 2, 2023.

A community garden opened Friday in Cleveland's Buckeye-Woodhill neighborhood to bring fresh, healthy foods to a historically redlined and underserved community.

Where there is now a fenced in plot of newly-planted carrots, collard greens, butternut squash and more once stood abandoned homes and later empty vacant lots.

"It was a residential area," Western Reserve Land Conservancy Urban Greenspace Coordinator Khalid Ali said. "After the demo, you had three vacant lots here and Pastor Fields and Iris were able to acquire those lots from that."

Calvary Hill Church of God in Christ Pastor Ernest Fields and his wife Iris, an avid gardener, began leasing the land in 2015 to turn it into a small community garden made up of a few planter boxes.

"I wanted to do the things that I had done all my life, which was just grow vegetables and things like that in my yard," she said. "But then I thought, 'I want to get bigger than that, and I want friends, I want people to have people to talk to.'"

With support from Land Studio, Western Reserve Land Conservancy, Buckeye Ministry and Missions Alliance and other community partners, the Fields' vision grew to include a seven-foot fence, with a built-in sprinkler system and a pavilion with more to come.

"We've done a concerted effort to not only green up the space, but we were doing property inventories, working on code enforcement issues, creating pocket parks," Western Reserve Land Conservancy Senior Vice President and Director of Thriving Communities Matt Zone said. "So, we've been heavily invested in this part of Cleveland for over a decade."

The garden will serve as a source of fresh and healthy produce, in an area that lacks access, Zone said.

"This [neighborhood] is part of a food desert," he said. "So, any time that we as an organization can empower people and help them create access and pathways to create and grow fresh food that's what we are excited to do."

Iris, who spent 35 years working in public education before retiring, said the garden will also be a place to educate people of all ages about

the benefits of growing and eating their own food.

"I like to think of a garden as an opportunity for people to know nutrition and to know why we need to eat more greens," Iris said. "So, you're growing the collard greens, you're growing the turnip greens, you're going the spinach, you're growing the lettuce, you're more likely to eat it, you're more likely to do something with it."

The Buckeye-Woodhill neighborhood has the lowest life expectancy of any community in Cuyahoga County, Cleveland City Council President Blaine Griffin said during Friday's celebration. But community gardens and accessible green space are steps toward improving the area's economic and environmental wellbeing, he said.

"That's how you improve life expectancy," he said. "Homeownership to create wealth, making sure we have a social impact to make sure that we deal with the jobs and the economy in the neighborhood, but also to make sure that we deal with the environment and given safe places where people can go congregate, be in a nice shaded city where we've got a nice pavilion, as well as being able to grow our own produce."

The crops currently planted are green beans, poll beans, bush beans, tomatoes, zucchini squash, butternut squash, beets, and onions. Summer Sprout, Cleveland's Community Garden Program through The Ohio State University will donate additional Cabbage, eggplant, corn and a variety of peppers to be planted in the garden, Iris said.

The crops won't be ready to harvest until late summer to early fall. Those interested in volunteering or receiving the produce can reach out to Iris at (216) 702-0385 or by email at iris-fields2@AOL.com.