

A Green Thumb for God

What could a busy housewife do to help the poor? Dian Roberson rolled up her sleeves and planted a vegetable garden that feeds hundreds in Idaho.

Dian Roberson is a humble woman with a God-sized vision. The 38-year-old mother of five homeschoools her children and teaches them by example the value of helping others. A self-described “gardening fanatic,” Roberson came up with a bold idea in 1997—to plant a garden on church property and use the produce to help low-income families in the community.

“I grew up thinking, I will never garden, I will never weed,” says Roberson, whose parents homesteaded and farmed land in Nampa, west of Boise. But God had other plans for her.

The 2,500-member Boise Vineyard church is in a suburb appropriately named Garden City. Label it coincidence or an act of God’s providence, but the church happened to have plenty of land available for Roberson’s experiment. Boise Vineyard sits on 22 acres, with the “Garden 0’ Feedin,’” as it’s called, occupying a sunny corner bordered by towering cottonwood trees and a small creek.

Roberson and her volunteers work half an acre that’s covered with six-inch raised beds, trellises and tomato cages. The garden is planted with green beans, peas, radishes, carrots, tomatoes, squash, pumpkins, melons, jalapeños, eggplant and cucumbers. Along the perimeter are immature raspberries and a handful of precocious fruit trees.

The garden paths are neatly lined with round river rock, marigolds and pots bursting with lavender flowers, dangling

from an arbor. Adjacent to the garden is the Barnabas Center, an impressive structure that reflects the mission of the church: "Come as you are and you will be loved."

Pastor Tri Robinson has no misgivings about empowering his flock to use their gifts and talents for God's glory. The garden project is just one of many creative ministry outreaches of the church.

The benevolence ministry of the Barnabas Center operates a food pantry, a legal clinic and a health clinic. The legal and health clinics are staffed by professionals from the church who use their gifts and knowledge to serve the community.

Roberson and her husband, Rick, initially got involved with the outreach of the food pantry by packing boxes for disadvantaged families. Later, they took an even more active role by starting the garden.

It doesn't take much discernment to see that the gifts of mercy and helps flow naturally out of Roberson. When she saw a need to provide fresh produce to low-income families, she looked for a way to combine her green thumb with helping the less fortunate.

"No matter what you love doing, God can find a way to use your talent," Roberson explains. "He can use anything, including digging in the dirt!"

The Robersons feel fortunate to attend a church with a vision that matches their desire to make a difference. "I developed a love for gardening, and I want to share that passion with others," Roberson says.

Roberson is a “master gardener,” a designation that combines hours of education with a commitment to serve the community through volunteer gardening. She takes her cues, she says, from God the Master Gardener, whom she believes has given her the skills she needs to oversee the Garden O’ Feedin’. She is always willing to hone the gift God has given her to become even more proficient at something she thought she would never do. Her gentleness and humility are apparent.

“This isn’t about me,” Roberson insists. “There are so many people who help make it all happen. I see myself as a servant. Everyone is given a love and passion for something so we can serve God and help others.”

The Robersons are raising five children—one is adopted, and two are mixed-race foster children. The children help in the garden—pulling weeds, planting seeds and occasionally sneaking a taste of the produce.

“People are so thankful for the fresh produce,” Roberson says. The pantry provides as many as 1,000 food boxes every month. These serve as a food supplement to needy families.

Hispanics who visit the pantry enjoy the fresh tomatoes and jalapeños because they add flavor to their food. And, as Roberson discovered by providential accident recently, an influx of Kosovo refugees were excited by the fresh beets—a vegetable few Americans enjoy.

“People who come into the food pantry have so many struggles in their lives,” Roberson says. “They are overwhelmed with substance-abuse issues, homelessness or simply can’t find a

job.”

Taking care of people’s physical needs is what Christianity is all about, she believes, referring to the parable of the Good Samaritan, who helped an injured man lying along the side of the road. At the end of the parable, Jesus tells those who are listening to the story, “Go and do likewise” (see Luke 10:37).

Jesus also mentions five significant actions taken by the merciful traveler: He went to where the hurting man was; he took pity on him; he bandaged his wounds; he took him to an inn, where he could recover from his wounds; and he paid for the man’s immediate care.

“Our goal,” Roberson explains, “is to show Christ’s unconditional love to those in need.” When people can see that someone cares for them, they become more open to the gospel, she believes. Though the Garden O’ Feedin’ wasn’t started as an evangelistic outreach, it sometimes softens people’s hearts to the truth of God’s Word.

“We talk and pray with everyone,” Roberson says. “Sometimes people are resistant. They say, ‘No, I don’t want you to pray for me.’ But eventually many of them wind up in church.”

She explains how addressing people’s physical needs often encourages them to open up and share things they have never told anyone. “Relationships develop with the people we are serving. We aren’t just dispensing food,” she says.

“Our goal is the same as that of Christ. We want to pull people up. We want to help them physically. And in doing so, we prepare the fallow ground that helps them spiritually as

well.”

Roberson believes God calls Christians to use whatever talents, abilities or tools they have for His purposes. And that’s exactly what she decided to do—take a step of faith to make a difference for Him.

Says Roberson: “You don’t serve here for long unless you see people as God sees them.”

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For more information about the Garden O’ Feedin’ ministry, call 208-377-1477. Send tax-deductible gifts to Christian Life Missions, Attn: Unsung Heroes, P.O. Box 952248, Lake Mary, FL 32795-22489.