

Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project
Interview with Catherine Holmes by Tessa Desmond
Conducted on September 27th, 2023 in Farmville, NC

[00:00:00] **Tessa Desmond:** Today is September 27th, 2023. I'm Tessa Lewinsky Desmond conducting an interview for the Heirloom Gardens Oral History Project. Thank you for sitting for the interview today. Um, would you be willing to introduce yourself and share anything that you feel, that feels important to you about where you're from or, um, or, or helping us to situate who you are?

[00:00:26] **Catherine Holmes:** My name is Catherine Holmes. I've been in Farmville since 1990. Came down from New York to go to East Carolina, majoring in art, was actually born in Texas, but, uh, I helped, I'm past president of the community garden.

[00:00:49] **Tessa Desmond:** Lovely, thank you for being with us. Will you talk a little bit about where you're from in Texas, places you call home, and how you came to Farmville?

[00:00:59] **Catherine Holmes:** Well, I was just born in Texas, my folks were both in the Air Force, so we were at Lackland Air Force Base, but at the age of six I moved north, we went to Massachusetts, my mom was from there, and ended up in Long Island, . I wanted to get out of New York, so I came south and, ended up with East Carolina University.

[00:01:25] **Tessa Desmond:** And what did you do at East Carolina University?

[00:01:28] **Catherine Holmes:** I majored in art education, so I actually became a teacher. And I've had students who have become teachers themselves, so that has made me very proud.

[00:01:42] **Tessa Desmond:** Can you tell me a little bit about how you came to know how to garden?

[00:01:47] **Catherine Holmes:** Oh, yes. My grandparents, my mother's side, had a garden up in Massachusetts, and every summer we would go up there.

They actually did composting way back when. So, I remember that. I remember having the fresh carrots from their garden. My grandmother used to make homemade tomato juice, and we'd have that. So, I actually in Scouts did a garden badge, and uh, my dad had a garden, especially tomatoes. And then when I came down here and got married, I had six tomato plants and the fellow I was dating, I asked him to help me.

He brought his tiller over and tilled a good section of my backyard to put the six tomato plants. So we ended up gardening. Once we got married and, uh, he had a big garden from where he was before. So he was very much into it. And, um, that's what got me into helping with the community garden.

[00:03:06] **Tessa Desmond:** Are there special varieties of carrots or tomatoes that you remember either from your grandparents garden or that you grew in your garden? Things that people that maybe don't know the names of.

I think we tried different varieties like the beefsteak and the big boys and then we got Roma tomatoes so that we could do canning because I learned how to can and that was something, uh, I've still got cans on my shelf from 2013. Yes, and learned how to freeze.

[00:03:44] **Catherine Holmes:** So, um, yes. And my husband introduced me to, Oh, what's it called? It's all colorful.

[00:03:54] **Tessa Desmond:** Is it Swiss chard?

[00:03:56] **Catherine Holmes:** Yes, the Swiss chard. And so I ended up, when I was doing the community garden, I had a bed down there. And I put Swiss chard in there. Um, very good for the wintertime. And, very tasteful.

[00:04:13] **Tessa Desmond:** Well, you know I want to hear about the community garden. What can you tell me about the early days of the community garden? Getting it started, what was that like?

[00:04:22] **Catherine Holmes:** Yes. Well, it was a vacant lot. And I had been told that the A. C. Monk family had given it to the town. And that we needed to go to the town, to the councilman, and ask for permission to be able to grow some edible food on it instead of having it be a vacant lot. And so I did and I approached them and they liked the idea and they ended up granting us half a city block and they offered to put water. So, that's how we got started. That was in 2016. And we sent off a soil sample. We actually did some digging. I think Bob found a bottle.

I found some marbles. One of our members told us about her grandmother lived on the corner house on that lot. So yes, it was definitely very interesting. So we started in the ground itself. The weeds took over that year, so we ended up getting the raised beds and we built them ourselves, or at least tried to, one of the neighbors saw me struggling and came over with his, a portable drill, it went zip, zip, zip, and put the frames together. So they were four foot by sixteen foot beds, and they were only one plank high, so we ended up doubling that so that we didn't have to bend over as much.

[00:06:14] **Tessa Desmond:** Why did you start the garden? What were the early dreams?

[00:06:19] **Catherine Holmes:** Well, we actually planted on it being the seed so that as the town was knocking down vacant homes and making vacant lots that we could have a community garden in each of those vacant lots around the town.

That was actually the plan. So, uh, our current president is a graduate of NC State in agriculture. So he is definitely interested in what we're doing and we do try and include them, the townspeople to come in when we're doing. So, yes.

[00:07:07] **Tessa Desmond:** And who gardens at the community garden and how did that community come to form?

[00:07:12] **Catherine Holmes:** It was actually a group of interested people. We had a contest trying to figure out what we were going to call ourselves. The winner was rooted in community and it ended up already being taken by somebody else. So now we're just the Farmville Community Garden but, um, It's just townspeople. We actually have some people from that neighborhood who were watching us.

One woman said that she came across on days when it was dry and would water certain beds that looked dry just because that's what she felt like it needed. So that was the intent, was to be able to get people that lived right around there. We've had a couple come by because they walked their dog and saw it.

And so they are now members. And Zach, who's the current president, he settled here because of the community garden. He checked in Greenville and there was not a garden near where he wanted to buy. So Farmville was the reason why he's here and the community garden in it.

[00:08:36] **Tessa Desmond:** What are some of the challenges that you have faced as a community garden?

[00:08:41] **Catherine Holmes:** I guess we were trying to figure out whether we needed a fence around it or not for the deer, or for some of the people in the community if they were ending up taking some of the food we were growing, um, that was one thing, but we, like I said, the, the weeds had taken over, so we were just trying to get that taken care of.

We have the town, who is now able to mow around and keep some of that down. We've put wood chips. in there for the mulch to help keep the weeds down. And they're going to be doing another project with more mulch specifically. The town has provided us with some money so that we can get good soil and, uh, seeds.

[00:09:41] **Tessa Desmond:** Do you still have a plot there?

[00:09:43] **Catherine Holmes:** No. Due to health, I can't.

[00:09:45] **Tessa Desmond:** When you did, what kinds of things did you grow in your plot?

[00:09:49] **Catherine Holmes:** Uh, definitely I grew tomatoes and squash, zucchini. I learned about, uh, zucchini lasagna because my husband's diabetic, so he can't do the pastas. And I was able to grow zucchini that was probably a good 5 or 6 inches across and be able to get good sized noodles. And whenever I made that, I would make three batches at a time and freeze the majority of it.

[00:10:20] **Tessa Desmond:** What's, you know, a favorite memory or two of, of time in the garden, either alone or with other gardeners?

[00:10:29] **Catherine Holmes:** I guess being able to see what's produced and bringing home, being able to yield what's there and eat it fresh and getting into The canning, and the, because I've canned collards, and I've canned onions, and I've canned, uh, green beans.

I've got lots of green beans and canning tomatoes. And even, uh, making some tomato sauce already with the herbs.

[00:11:02] **Tessa Desmond:** Now do you have the pressure can for that?

[00:11:05] **Catherine Holmes:** I think we did the pressure can for that. Yeah, the water bath was just for regular tomatoes.

[00:11:12] **Tessa Desmond:** What else would you like to share about your garden or your time in the Farmville community Garden?

[00:11:18] **Catherine Holmes:** When I had to close up that lot, I did put some in a container. We had cats and I've got cat litter. containers. So I'm repurposing those. So that's the kind of garden I have at home. And even this year, my husband said, we've got a volunteer tomato plant. So he's been nurturing it. So it's right by the front door so that he can take care of it.

[00:11:45] **Tessa Desmond:** Can you talk a little bit about volunteers who have helped in the garden? What contributions have been made and who they are.

[00:11:53] **Catherine Holmes:** Oh yes, we've had, um, 225, the Boy Scouts, who have come and done, they've built some more of the, uh, beds for us. They've added on to the ones we had so that seniors could be able to use them.

They've made benches and birdhouses and have actually done an orchard. So, they have really worked hard. They've had one of them made the, uh, tool shed. for us and had his father's grandfather come in and with the bush hog and knocking stuff over and I remember the townspeople you know right around there gaping at it like what are they doing.

Um, but yes, and, uh, we've even had a church group come in, uh, for the summer, and they were working, and they've been back several years, and are amazed, I think, at how the garden is still working.

[00:13:08] **Tessa Desmond:** What impact do you, did you see in the groups who came to volunteer to the town? Was it good for the Boy Scouts to be in the garden? What did they learn while they were there?

[00:13:18] **Catherine Holmes:** Yes, they um, they learned about how things grow. They learned about how to be able to take care of, and they reaped the benefits of them. So, yes. The town even put a fig tree from the old library onto the premises. So we've got figs that grow there.

[00:13:44] **Tessa Desmond:** I saw that fig tree.

[00:13:45] **Catherine Holmes:** Yes.

[00:13:48] **Tessa Desmond:** Can you describe it? Because whoever's listening, they can't see that fig tree.

[00:13:52] **Catherine Holmes:** Yes. It is huge. I don't know how tall or how wide, but it definitely needs to be pruned. But they had put it almost in the middle of the driveway for getting in there. But, uh, it, , uh, flourishes. So there are figs that are able to be eaten from it.

[00:14:13] **Tessa Desmond:** And then do people share the figs that anyone can pick?

Yes, anyone can pick those. Mm hmm. We do have one water source, and we're trying to get another one because we are expanding to the other side of the lot. So we're from street to street.

That's excellent. Is there anything else you want to share?

[00:14:34] **Catherine Holmes:** Uh, I know that, uh, they're going to be growing food for the community soup kitchen. That soup kitchen's been going for 30 years. It's across the street from my church. My church owns the building, and uh, Zach being a chef has definitely contributed. We've had Valerie, who has done food, me, and the Farmville Senior Council has done a day.

Uh, or two. It's what, the fifth Wednesday, I think. Fifth Wednesday. Fifth Wednesday of the month. Yeah. So, that's uh, that's been going. So it goes from one to the other. And it's being shared.