

Nurturing Plants and Hope

Gardens multiply in Sandtown-Winchester as community spirit begins to bloom.
[FINAL Edition]

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On a block in Sandtown-Winchester cooled by a canopy of sycamores, Mary Day -Smith fills brick planters with pansies, marigolds, coleus, petunias, salvia and begonias. Mary, 10, has grown very attached to the flowers and vegetable plants that have transformed her West Baltimore neighborhood into a verdant oasis.

"It's like our own children; that's how fun it is to plant flowers," says Mary, who is working with other kids under the guidance of neighbors Justine Bonner and Barbara Love.

Soon, the kids will follow another elder, Rudolph Boston, around the corner to a large community garden plot where he will show them how to sow peanuts.

A neighborhood once pocked with trash-strewn vacant lots has become fertile ground; not just for zinnias and zucchini, but for lives no longer held hostage by drugs and despair.

What began as an effort to fight "crime and grime" has become a catalyst for engaging children, feeding the hungry, teaching skills, luring newcomers, improving the environment, re-establishing the community.

"It strengthens the neighborhood to have these spaces, from an aesthetic point of view," says Bonner, who has played a crucial role in her neighborhood's transition. "In terms of health, the garden improves the quality of the air," she says.

The community's nine gardens, all within an area bordered by Riggs, Fremont, Lafayette and Fulton avenues, "act like a bridge between the older group and the younger group," Bonner says.

The Sandtown project has generated a web of garden activists that reaches beyond Baltimore to include volunteers from as far away as Cambodia and Malawi.

Bonner's neighborhood featured a few showcase gardens when the retired New York City middle school teacher returned seven years ago to the North Carrollton Avenue home where she was born. But her city block's common back lot had mostly become a dumping ground.

Her childhood landscape had been different. "I think there were some garages back there, [but] most of it was always an open area. There was a nice tree that used to have a tire swing and the boys used to play baseball back there," Bonner says.

Bonner's rejuvenated backyard garden spilled into her former playground. One morning, a group of kids came through the alley and asked, "'Can we help? Can we help?'"

At first, "I said no," Bonner says. Ever the teacher, she thought they needed a botany lesson first. But she relented and let the kids dig holes and plant seeds willy-nilly, squash next to zucchini next to okra. "It was not organized, but everything they planted, grew," Bonner says. Their efforts gave them a stake in the garden and its upkeep.

An earlier garden project initiated by Wesley Richardson with the University of Maryland Cooperative Extension had not involved the children, Bonner says. "Some didn't respect it and thought the heirloom tomatoes were toys."

Soon, Bonner and neighbors were filling the lot's newly constructed raised beds with pumpkins, collard greens, corn and a profusion of flowers. One plot was devoted to the children, who took ownership with the words "Kids' Garden" spelled out in soda cans. Because the soil tested high for lead, they were first steered away from the vegetables until the levels were reduced with the addition of compost, fertilizer and other materials.

A deterrent to crime

Bonner's efforts overlapped with those of JoAnn Osborne, president of the Carrollton Avenue Community Association. In 1993, with non-profit and private support, she and others planted a garden as a deterrent to crime. Vacant lots were encouraging drug activity because they "gave the community the look that nobody cared," Osborne says.

The neighborhood's collective expertise expanded when Bonner and two other neighbors, Richardson and Hannah Trent, became master gardeners through the Cooperative Extension program. And, delighted by the new bloom on Sandtown, more and more residents offered their services in the garden.

Together, the gardeners made an empowering statement about controlling the environment. Either "you're going to determine what is going to be here -- or you can let other forces determine that," Bonner says.

The most active gardeners are responsible for specific beds. Trent became the primary caretaker of the Gateway Garden, a narrow plot on the site of a razed rowhouse filled with astilbe, irises and hostas.

Trent also tends the "Memory Garden" on the corner of Mosher and Carey streets. It is a tribute to the "young people that were dying on the corner and the older families that died in this neighborhood," she says.

Landscaped in the shape of a cross, the Memory Garden is filled with yellow day lilies and rudbeckia. Before, it was cluttered with litter and graffiti marred an adjacent wall. Now, neighbors "won't let anybody come in and just mess it up," Trent says.

As flowers and shrubbery have replaced scrapped appliances and garbage, drug dealers go elsewhere to hide their stashes, Bonner and Osborne say. If they're around, though, they may help in the garden. "Even drug users and dealers respect the fact that you're doing something to improve the environment," Bonner says.

'Seen a drastic change'

Each garden represents a struggle. The "Small Street Garden" behind Barbara Love's home came into existence only after two derelict garages were torn down by the city. "We cried and we begged. We got the garages down and the trees clipped," Love says.

The Parks & People Foundation, Civic Works, the city's Clean Sweep program and other groups have provided muscle, expertise and supplies to the garden project. Plants come from Amazing Grace Lutheran Church in East Baltimore and Bonner's circuit of inexpensive nurseries and friends' yards.

The Kedesh House of Prayer Christian Church congregation on North Carrollton created its own "New Beginnings Garden," abundant with tulips, crabapple trees and liriop. As the gardens have proliferated, "We've seen a drastic change" in the community, says the church's pastor, James Mullen.

Amanda Cunningham, who manages Parks & People's Community Forestry program, refers to the garden expansion as Bonner's "Monopoly game."

As the Sandtown-Winchester garden project grows, Parks & People supplies the necessary resources, Cunningham says. "We keep adding based on capacity. You can't build the Taj Mahal without the internal capacity to care for it."

Cunningham has encouraged the group to experiment with gardening techniques to improve the area watershed. One garden features a series of swales planted with native flowers and grasses that collect rain runoff and let it soak slowly into the ground.

The community gardens flourish because of people like Robert Burton, who built the planters on the 900 block of N. Carrollton and is also a gifted gardener. "You've got to talk to [plants] so they'll do well," he says. What does he say? "Now that's a trade secret," he replies.

Other volunteers include Ben Williams, who does the watering, and Nathaniel Williams, who built a nursery with a frame and plastic canopy for starting seedlings.

'Skills of our parents'

The group is well connected to area nonprofits that draw volunteers from around the world. Recently, Bonner gave a primer on neighborhood history to visitors who came from Mozambique, Sierra Leone, Malawi, Haiti, Cambodia and Chicago to attend a World Relief Organization conference.

Wearing a wide-brimmed, fuchsia straw hat, Bonner explains that the community's majestic rowhouses were built at the turn of the 20th century.

African-Americans, including Bonner's parents, arrived toward the end of the 1930s, and made a good living at Bethlehem Steel and other manufacturing jobs.

Desegregation prompted an exodus from the neighborhood, just as jobs were drying up and the houses began to deteriorate, Bonner explains. Later, with the discovery of lead paint's harmful effects, many houses were torn down, leaving dozens of unsightly vacant lots.

"As a group, we decided we were going to do something about that, using the skills of our parents," Bonner tells the group.

Plans for the community garden include installation of a greenhouse next summer. As always, advances are counterbalanced by setbacks. Lately, the gardens have been plagued by thieves who take plants and sell them to residents of a new development a few blocks away.

But Bonner -- ever the teacher and the student -- has learned from that as well: "You just have to plant for them and plant for yourself and hope that both of you will have enough."

Planting together

Interested in starting a community garden? Here are the steps to take to get your garden growing. Form a community association group with an active leader. If you need help in Baltimore, call the Mayor's Office of Neighborhoods, 410-396-4735.

Select a place to plant the garden. A lot must receive at least six hours of sunlight each day to grow vegetables. The easiest method is to choose a vacant lot owned by the city and adopt it (The Office of Neighborhoods can help).

Once the lot is adopted, you will need to clean it. Organize a trash removal day, and ask the city to provide a roll-off trash bin. The city will remove dead trees from city property.

Maryland Cooperative Extension's Urban Agriculture Program (410- 396-1888) and its Master Gardeners can help you plan the garden, and advise on seeking funds to support the effort. The Parks and People Foundation (410-448-5663) can also help. Before you work the soil and plant, take a soil sample and have it analyzed -- for lead as well as the regular tests. Cooperative Extension's Urban Agriculture Program can help.

You can also go to the Extension Web site, www.hgic.umd.edu, and look in "online publications" for a list of area "Soil Laboratories." Once you have the results, the Urban

Agriculture people can advise on how to treat the soil to get good crops and great flowers. First and foremost, you will need to add a lot of compost. Plants like to grow in soil additives.

Consider planting vegetables and flowers together to help reduce losses due to insects and disease.

The garden will need water. Locate the nearest fire hydrant, and request a support letter from the Urban Agriculture Program. With this letter and a written request from your community garden association, you can get a permit from Public Works to use the hydrant. You will need to provide the wrenches, hose adapters and hoses.

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[Illustration] Photo(s); Caption: 1-3. Anthony Smith (left), 5, and Kelly Richberg, 6, plant flowers with Justine Bonner. They are filling one of 19 brick flower boxes along North Carrollton Avenue. Barbara Love (below) is one of the community gardeners. Rudolph Boston (below right) leads Sandtown children to a plot where they will plant peanuts. 4. A group of volunteers helps to beautify a vacant lot on Small Street, behind North Carrollton Avenue.; Credit: 1-3. Elizabeth Malby : Sun Staff Photos 4. Jed Kirschbaum : Sun Staff

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Photo(s); 1-3. Anthony Smith (left), 5, and Kelly Richberg, 6, plant flowers with Justine Bonner. They are filling one of 19 brick flower boxes along North Carrollton Avenue. [Barbara Love] (below) is one of the community gardeners. [Rudolph Boston] Boston (below right) leads Sandtown children to a plot where they will plant peanuts. 4. A group of volunteers helps to beautify a vacant lot on Small Street, behind North Carrollton Avenue.; Credit: 1-3. Elizabeth Malby : Sun Staff Photos 4. Jed Kirschbaum : Sun Staff Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction or distribution is prohibited without permission.

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