

On a quiet street in Wilkinsburg, a borough just east of Pittsburgh, a festival of food is growing on lots reclaimed after two derelict houses were demolished.

Near a large pile of stones salvaged from the houses' foundations, garden beds are bountiful with leeks, tomatoes, squash, rhubarb, beets, peppers, eggplant, beans, peas, various herbs and greens, and other vegetables. They are surrounded on two sides by a wooden fence with black locust posts and pickets made of white oak and sassafras. The gate sports a small leaded-glass window, suggesting the designer has a creative sensibility about landscaping, gardening and, perhaps, life itself.

Because local restaurants' demand for fresh produce far exceeds supply, it's all gardening all the time on this quarter acre set in a quiet neighborhood that Mindy Schwartz characterizes as marginalized and challenged, but with "tons of potential." Schwartz founded Grow Pittsburgh, a collaboration of urban farmers and market gardeners who are helping to plant new life and hope in such communities across the Pittsburgh region.

Last year, Schwartz wrote a business plan for the organization, funded through a \$35,000 Heinz Endowments grant, which she directed toward promoting urban agriculture as a way of revitalizing tired city neighborhoods, healing the environment and improving individual health and nutrition.

Grow Pittsburgh has since received support totaling more than \$270,000 from the Endowments and, among others, the Forbes and Fisher funds, the Grable and Pittsburgh foundations, and the Garden Club of Allegheny County.

The money has been used for projects such as community gardens, a summer teen employment program and a partnership with Slow Food Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Public Schools to create vegetable gardens known as "edible schoolyards" at three schools.

"Our goal is to do such a great job that other schools want to replicate the program," says Schwartz, who also is looking to buy property to establish an urban farm. "We want to own and control and expand the community of urban farmers... and replicate all the benefits.

"Food is the platform for what we do. It crosses cultures, brings people together, and it's the language that everyone speaks," she says. "And through that language, we're able to manifest the real benefits of what we are going after. It's good for the community and produces energy."

Schwartz's sentiments reflect the pride western Pennsylvanians have long had in the region's agricultural roots and green spaces — thousands of acres of parks, forests and undeveloped land in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County alone.

But Grow Pittsburgh also illustrates how green is spreading, from formerly vacant and trash-strewn lots to urban schoolyards, rooftops, artwork and newly established greenhouses. Green space expansion is fast becoming a subtext in

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**BY SETH R. BECKERMAN
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JOSHUA FRANZOS**

Seth Beckerman lives and gardens south of Pittsburgh, and has written extensively about agriculture and urban gardening in the developing world. His last story for h was about downtown Pittsburgh's newest performance venue, the Cabaret at Theater Square.

June King holds a small bunch of Salvia Victoria Blue flowers that she helps tend as captain of the neighborhood garden planted by Western Pennsylvania Conservancy volunteers at the intersection of Kirkpatrick Street and Fifth Avenue in Pittsburgh.

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RODEN

VARIETY



Rose-colored orchids frame Sue Arlott, a greenhouse assistant at the Bidwell Training Center in Pittsburgh. Arlott, who has worked at the Bidwell greenhouses for one-and-a-half years, is also a former student in the center's horticulture technology program.

economic, cultural, educational and even faith-based developments that have emerged from the region's smokestack past. Often these projects are spurred by private backing from organizations ranging from Pittsburgh's largest philanthropic group, the Richard King Mellon Foundation, to the grassroots-focused Sprout Fund. A *Sierra Club* magazine article this summer quoted a report that ranked Pittsburgh No. 1 last year in a study of community gardens and farmers' markets per capita.

The Endowments' revitalization efforts in the region include encouraging the reclamation and preservation of green space, with urban gardening as a component of that work. This summer, three Endowments interns learned about grant making by visiting urban gardens in Allegheny County. The recent high school graduates chose urban gardening

as their internship focus because of their interest in promoting health education and efforts to eliminate childhood obesity. They recommended approval of support totaling \$45,000 to urban gardening projects they had researched, including Grow Pittsburgh's edible schoolyards.

Overall, the Endowments has contributed more than \$1.2 million to help fund a variety of garden projects that are reaping multiple benefits for local communities, says Caren Glotfelty, director of the Endowments' Environment Program. One of these is shedding light on the forces that contribute to the departure of people from urban areas, which worsens the region's sprawl problem.

"Taking property that in many cases is vacant in the worst sense — lots that have been abandoned to weeds and trash — and converting it to productive use turns a negative into a positive," says Glotfelty. "Any kind of green is good for people to be around, but productive green space suggests that something is happening in a community."

Urban gardening programs that lead to more vibrant communities also complement the Endowments' Civic Design Task Force strategies, which encourage cultivating attractive parks and landscapes along with constructing environmentally responsible and beautifully designed buildings. In a 2001 statement issued in acceptance of the first gold medal awarded by the American Institute of Architects' Pittsburgh chapter, Howard Heinz Endowment Chair Teresa Heinz noted the Heinz family's long-held conviction that revitalizing urban settings requires surroundings that will draw people to the area.

"Design excellence doesn't just mean creating spaces that inspire other architects and other designers; it means creating places that inspire the people who use them," she said. "Ultimately, it means creating places that make our cities better and more desirable places to live in. Not just to look at, or to read about in architectural magazines, but to live in."



One of the region's most extensive urban garden projects is a key element of the Endowments-supported Green Neighborhood Initiative, a joint program of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy and Conservation Consultants Inc. that started about a decade ago. While Conservation Consultants focused on helping communities improve energy efficiency in homes, schools and churches, the conservancy worked with residents to identify appropriate places for establishing gardens. The two groups also sponsored community meetings that ramped up residents' understanding and awareness of energy efficiency and the relationship between green space, including gardens, and quality of life.

As part of the initiative's gardening program, which has received about \$994,000 in Endowments grants so far, volunteers and residents have planted and maintained more than 150 community gardens that are now integral to the Pittsburgh landscape.

"We addressed other opportunities and issues in the community, such as empty lots that were trashed," says Cynthia Carrow, vice president of the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy who was chair of Conservation Consultants' board of directors when the program began. "It was a real community-building project."

In Pittsburgh's East Liberty neighborhood, increasing the number of gardens is one strategy of an environmentally sensitive, or "green," community design plan that is receiving support across racial and economic lines. "We have a constituency that understands what unsustainable development is all about," says Rob Stephany, director of commercial development for the East Liberty Development Corp. This, after all, is the area that recently rid itself of a failed



high-rise apartment building that urban planners had plopped in the middle of a vibrant business district.

With \$100,000 in funding from the Endowments and a matching grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, the East Liberty Development Corp. created a "green overlay," which mapped current and potential green spaces in the community. Work at the neighborhood level has been strategic, with design and development guidelines created to enhance and sustain the community's watershed and its "urban canopy" of green space, which includes gardens, trees and parks.

But urban gardening can be more than a community development tool. It also can be art, as Stephanie Flom attests.

Marc Mondor, a principal architect with evolve EA in Pittsburgh, stands on the green roof of a Giant Eagle grocery store in the city's Shadyside neighborhood. Mondor was a consultant with the supermarket chain in the renovation of the existing building to meet green design standards.



Artist Delanie Jenkins is ensconced in the “honeysuckle room,” which she titled “To Gather Again.” The organic sculpture was erected in Pittsburgh’s Frank Curto Park as part of the Persephone Project through the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University.

Through the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University, Flom established the Persephone Project, an effort to connect the public to art and the environment by promoting gardening as a contemporary art medium and recognizing gardeners as artists. The project was partially supported by \$61,000 in Endowments funding.

At a Persephone site in the Frank Curto Park in Pittsburgh, overlooking the Allegheny River, sculptor and gardener Delanie Jenkins created an organic tribute to her grandparents in Texas. She planted cotton, okra, loofa and fragrant herbs, and erected a “honeysuckle room” by setting up trellises surrounded by honeysuckle plants, with two “windows” framing a view of the northern section of the city.

Magic Penny Gardens are a community component of the Persephone Project, with locations in the Hill

District, Lawrenceville, Polish Hill and East Liberty city neighborhoods and the nearby towns of Wilkinsburg and Homestead. Artists in those communities created public gardens using plants contributed by neighborhood residents.

Demonstrating the economic development potential of gardening in urban settings is the Bidwell Training Center, which has offered vocational training on Pittsburgh’s North Side for over three decades. The latest addition to its suite of programs is horticulture technology. Bill Strickland, president and CEO of Bidwell and the Manchester Craftsmen’s Guild, developed an interest in orchids about a dozen years ago when he received one as a gift. He visited greenhouses and realized that horticulture would be a good addition to Bidwell’s vocational programs, which also include culinary arts; medical coding and billing; and technology programs in pharmacy, chemicals and information. “I combined my interest in orchids with a desire to provide life skills for poor folks,” says Strickland.

Four technologically advanced greenhouses were built on the Bidwell campus with local, state and federal support as well as private funding. About \$30,000 from the Endowments helped fund the new horticultural technology program as it evolved. Orchids grown through the program are wholesaled to Giant Eagle and Whole Foods supermarkets, while food crops are sold to restaurants.

“We give our students the fundamentals and help them carve a niche in the green industry,” says Gary Baranowski, director of Bidwell’s horticultural technology program and a former director of the city’s Phipps Conservatory.

The six-month program has attracted individuals ages 18 to 65, with academic backgrounds ranging from GEDs to PhDs. A staff of five prepares students for jobs in greenhouse operations, interior “plantscaping,” agriculture, environmental technology, nursery management, landscaping, and the wholesale and retail floral industries. “We place between 75

and 85 percent of our students in the green industry,” Baranowski says. “We are not just training better gardeners, but want to bolster the economy and put trained people in careers.”

Water is essential for any green space development, but too much of a good thing can be a problem. Because Pittsburgh is an old industrial city with many combined sanitary and storm sewers, heavy rains often overwhelm sewage treatment facilities, forcing the release of untreated sewage into the rivers. While the obvious solution is to dig up and replace combined sewers with separate sanitary and storm lines, another long-term approach to mitigating the rainfall effects is to capture rainwater in rooftop gardens to reduce the runoff into combined sewers.

As a nonprofit partnership with the Allegheny County Sanitary Authority and the Allegheny County Health Department, 3 Rivers Wet Weather works with communities to find cost-effective and collaborative solutions to problems created by heavy rain. Using money primarily from the Environmental Protection Agency, along with support from the Endowments and others, 3 Rivers Wet Weather has partially funded two green roof installations and is negotiating for two more.

One of the green roofs is on Hammerschlag Hall at Carnegie Mellon University and features a pond and an array of grasses, perennials and flowers. The roof is divided into two parts so that the green and conventional roofs can be compared for temperature, insulation value and water runoff.

The largest green roof in Pittsburgh takes up 12,000 of the 52,000 square feet atop a recently renovated Giant Eagle grocery store in the city’s Shadyside neighborhood. As part of the project, also partially supported by 3 Rivers Wet

Weather, the green section of the roof is planted with several drought-resistant varieties of sedum. While engineering students from the University of Pittsburgh will measure water flow and other factors of similar-sized portions of the green and conventional roofs, residents of 56 condominiums built over a portion of the supermarket can enjoy a view of the roof garden from their balconies.

“How do we make schools better, attract people, make the physical environment better?” asks the Endowments’ Glotfelty. “Urban gardens are one piece of the picture, turning liabilities into assets. Creating gardens involves people, rebuilds relationships and connects individuals with nature again.” *h*

Jen Montgomery, a Grow Pittsburgh employee, collects a basket full of veggies at the Garden Dreams Urban Farm in Wilkinsburg, a struggling community just east of Pittsburgh. Grow Pittsburgh is a collaboration of urban farmers and market gardeners.

