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Urban greenewal: Fruits, vegetables, and flowers are thriving in lots throughout the city



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Jennifer Dennis vaguely recalls playing in her mother's garden as a little girl. But in the past couple of years, the 15-year-old Whitmer High School 10th grader has discovered the joy of tending plants in a small community garden in her West Toledo neighborhood.

"I love it. It's a lot of fun," she said on a recent summer morning, hunched over a raised vegetable bed pulling dew-covered weeds from soil in a garden enclosed in the courtyard at Washington Junior High School.

Taylor Howard, 6, left, and Nazhiere Taylor, 6, check to see what's growing in the garden at the Frederick Douglass Community Center in Toledo.

(THE BLADE/JETTA FRASER)

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She is among many people who enjoy spending a few hours a week in the late spring and summer working in recreational community gardens across the city. Community gardening on vacant city lots and on school, church, neighborhood, and civic organizations' grounds has been booming for the past couple of decades in many cities across the country.

In Toledo, about 37 community gardens have sprouted up following the creation of Toledo GROWs in 1995. A gardening outreach initiative of Toledo Botanical Garden, Toledo GROWs was started by the Ohio State University extension office.

"We function as a plant library. We provide resources like gardening tools, wood chips for gardens, seeds, and - most of all - education on how to improve soil quality for a garden," said Michael Szuberla, director of Toledo GROWs.

He said community gardens make an impact in many cities, increasing the value of homes in some neighborhoods and promoting resident stability in apartment complexes where people generally don't have green space.

On a sunny Saturday morning, Mr. Szuberla pulled weeds in the community garden at the Ten Eyck Tower apartment complex at Jefferson Avenue and 21st Street near downtown.

He worked with a group of teenagers in the Community Integration and Training for Employment Program of the Lucas County Juvenile Court system. The group is among five summer programs partnered with Toledo GROWs to work on community gardens in the city. "One of the challenges of urban gardening is the breaking of the ground," Mr. Szuberla said. "In most cases, we end up just piling a lot of dirt and manure on the lot, and that is how we start the garden."

At Washington Junior High, community gardening has "opened the eyes of students who never really thought of gardening as something people do for fun," said Scott Michaelis, a math teacher and special projects educator.

The garden was started in 2002. It is in an enclosed compound that was once an empty floodplain that students barely frequented. With a row of raised garden beds, a gazebo, and wooden benches, the garden is now a popular student hangout.

It has a manicured lawn and shade from a few cherry and apple trees, Mr. Michaelis said. Every year, the students add to the garden, which has gone from a few simple beds to an area featuring a range of flowers, along with tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, green peppers, spearmint beds, and a rock garden, he said.

During the academic year, the garden is run by the school's student council. In the summer, it is maintained by students and former students.

Drew Kidd, 14, a ninth grader at Whitmer, said he loves spending some of his summer mornings working in the Washington Junior High garden. "It's fun," he said. "I like working in the garden because it gives me something to do and I also like to have something to do outdoors when the weather is good."

For Shirley Tucker, a longtime Ten Eyck Tower resident, the community garden in front of her building is not only for recreation, but for her health.

"I have multiple sclerosis and I am limited in my exercise. Gardening is my exercise," she said, noting that she likes to rise early in the morning to work in her raised-bed section of the garden, where she grows squash, collard greens, potatoes, okra, and red and white onions.

"The most exciting thing for me is when I come into the garden in the summer and look under a leaf or a bush and see something new," Ms. Tucker said. "That's one of the reasons I love gardening because I am often surprised by what will grow."

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