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Gardens grow in the city

Sense of community thrives along with the plants



Gregory Vines drives a stake into the ever-expanding Ten Eyck Tower garden.
(THE BLADE/LORI KING)

By [TAHREE LANE](#)
BLADE STAFF WRITER

When the peppers are ripe, the greens are leafed out, and the tomatoes are juicy, Anna Daniels will bag them, put them in the basket on her walker, and head to the nearby soup kitchen at the Cherry Street Mission. They'll be a welcome addition to meals for people who are homeless.

The five plots she tends in the community garden behind her home in the 11-story Ten Eyck Tower on Jefferson and 21st streets produce hundreds of pounds of vegetables each season.

On a recent afternoon, Ms. Daniels is wearing maroon socks and a maroon T-shirt that reads "Need a hug? 1-800-Grandma" and wondering if the horse manure mixed into her soil hastened the demise of a couple of cucumber plants.

This ever-expanding garden just west of downtown is cared for by more than a dozen people who pay \$5 for the pleasure of playing in the dirt. It's one of the oldest of the 50 Toledo Grows community gardens, cooperative efforts that are located next to senior centers and apartment buildings, on church property, and empty lots.

Toledo Grows aims to build community and feed people through urban gardens, and was fueled in the 1990s by the passion of the late Robert J. Anderson and Sister M. Christine Pratt, director of Rural Life Ministries for the Toledo diocese's Catholic Charities. It began with six plots in 1996 as a coalition between Ohio State University Extension Service, Lucas Metropolitan Housing Authority, and Toledo Botanical Garden, and soon became TBG's primary outreach program.

Its annual budget is about \$100,000, which pays for one employee as well as seeds and plants, tools, soil preparation, education, summer camps for children, and job-training for about 40 youth through a Lucas County juvenile justice program, said Michael Szuberla, manager of Toledo Grows. Four AmeriCorps workers also support the program.

"We're always looking for more partners," said Mr. Szuberla, adding that it can take up to five years for a community garden to become well-established in a neighborhood. "The really dynamic, thriving gardens involve local organization, neighbors, and are multi-generational."

Shirley Tucker, the garden leader at Ten Eyck, is planning to write a gardening newsletter. Gardeners there swap plants, and give away or sell the produce they can't use.

She's got dozens of vegetables and flowers in her 6-by-40-foot raised bed; it makes for easier gardening, beneficial given that she has multiple sclerosis. She's training her tomatoes to grow vertically by tying them to overhead plastic piping; they'll produce more fruit and take up less space that way.

Ms. Tucker lived at Ten Eyck for five years before joining the gardening group five years ago, despite invitations and encouragement from her daughters.

"I just love it," she said. "I'm originally from Mississippi and in the 1950s, you could have a garden [with animals] in town."

What she doesn't love are poachers who sneak in at night to snatch cantaloupe and peppers and corn, sometimes destroying entire plants.

"Mainly it's some of the residents in the building," she said, adding that gardeners have told their neighbors to simply ask for vegetables when they want them.

Ceebee Kidd's yard is at the edge of a community garden on land owned by Glenwood Lutheran Church on Monroe Street west of the Toledo Museum of Art.

"This garden is a blessing. I've had young onions," said Mrs. Kidd, who turns 94 on Saturday. She supplies the garden with water, and chats with the workers, mostly children in an after-school program and youths in the juvenile program.

Almost 100 years ago, she spent summers on a relative's farm in Mississippi, milking cows and churning butter. She's always had a garden, but this season she's not up to it so the Toledo Grows workers are lending a hand.

On a breezy May day she had picked some early spinach and had it simmering in the kitchen of her long-time home adjacent to the concrete canyon called I-75.

For Montrice Coleman, like most adolescents, gardening is a new experience. He shovels mulch into a wheelbarrow and pushes it a short way, dumping and spreading it to create a path between plots.

"I like it. It's easy. The pay's good and it keeps me out of trouble," said young Coleman, a student at Woodward High School.

Contact Tahree Lane at: tlane@theblade.com or 419-724-6075.