

WE KEEP GROWING

Gardeners and farmers in Detroit are incredibly caring, creative, resourceful, and resilient people. For many, gardening and farming is a source of good food, exercise, and supplemental income, and the places these growers tend help them connect with nature, care for their communities and care for themselves. Keep Growing Detroit is excited to share our "We Keep Growing" storytelling project, which would not be possible without our research partners at Michigan State University and gardener-led storytelling committee. These stories are our attempt to document, share and do justice to the inspirational stories of the individuals within Detroit's beloved urban agriculture community. We hope you enjoy!



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TOMMIE BENDER

I was born in Montgomery, Alabama, and at that time, I think just about everyone had a garden there. They had berries growing around the fences there, and they always had greens. That's how I got into gardening. After I got married, here in Detroit, I had a little garden in my own backyard. In later years, when the house next door was torn down, I acquired the lot and had larger garden there.

When my husband became ill, I was away from gardening for many, many years. After he passed away, when I thought I was going to really get back into it, my daughter became ill. She passed away in March of this past year. It is sad because you don't expect to bury your children. Yeah, so I'm finally recovering from that because it took a lot out of me at first. And I'm adjusting as she had been sick for such a long time, and I had to have take care of her too. That's one reason why I didn't garden too much at that time.

When my daughter, Cheryl, passed, I started to garden in what had been her backyard —across the street on Rutherford, where I still live. Judy was the one who got me involved, at one of the community meetings I started with her a year or so after my husband and daughter died. I made friends with all the people that I gardened with because I didn't know them before I moved where I am now. There are seven of us now, and we usually work one day a week, when the weather permits. We have a garden in two of our members' backyards.

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I'm involved with gardening is because it supplements my income (and that's one of the reasons why I got into gardening the first place) plus I like a lot of vegetables. I eat a lot more vegetables because I have them right there, and I raise them, and I know how they're raised. Gardening also gives you opportunity to think about what you're going to do for the day, and life problems and whatever is going on around me. You learn so much from talking to other people in the garden. Yeah, it relaxes me. It made me a lot more pleasant.



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We have more than we can consume ourselves, so we gather the stuff from our communal efforts as well as our own backyards. We take our excess to the Eastern Market. We make a few cents out of it. My friends, I think everybody in the group that we're in, they love it.

It seems to me Keep Growing Detroit has grown quite a bit. I get part of my plants from them, they usually give a quite a variety. If it's something that they don't give, then I start my own.

Gardening is growing in Detroit. It seems like there are more people getting involved. I know there are more people coming to the little meetings that they have. I just hope that more people get involved in gardening—especially the

ones who have children. I imagine they would benefit from KGD because you learn a lot and they pass on a lot of material that would really help. It would help them financially because you invest in one packet of seeds and you're growing greens or beans or whatever to feed the family. You save a lot of money. I just hope that more people will start to garden here in the City of Detroit.

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DWIGHT THOMAS

Gardening has been something that has been in my family, and in my blood for as long as I can remember. Right now I have got two gardens, I've got my fruit trees in the back, and my bees.

Between my bees, my fruit trees and my gardens, I've got a full time job but it is something that I enjoy doing. Actually it's one of the healthiest things you can think of because we don't use any pesticides, chemicals or herbicides. My daughter told me, once, "Dad, I am having trouble going to the grocery store. Daddy the food just didn't taste good." So the food that you grow doesn't taste like anything you can get out of the grocery store. And just imagine that a lot of people don't get the experience walking out of your side door and cutting a head of cabbage and recognizing how different food tastes.

I always grow enough to eat. I grow enough to put away. And I grow enough to give away. So my senior citizens get love baskets throughout the growing season depending on what's in season. And I will tell anybody, I may not have a dime in my pocket but I will never be hungry. And that's because I've got enough sense and enough love and enough wherewithal to grow my own food and when you grow it organically, it's not a lot of money you have to spend.

I call gardening mental health time. My mood is very laidback now. I don't get excited, I don't get upset, I don't get stressed. Gardening is also physical health time. In November 1982 I got hit by a power line that knocked me straight into hell, I was partially paralyzed for 6 years. The doctors told me I'd never walk without a limp and I would

never be able to use my right hand. They told me that that's all we can do for you. I said well I know what to do. I will go back to gardening, which is something that will work my body and work my hand, and I have dug that garden across the street with my hands.

I turned this whole street into Eden garden, that's the name of my garden. All these vacant lots, I go up the street and turn every lot into a garden. It has garnered me a lot of respect from my neighbors. People drive by saying you sure have a nice garden and it makes you feel even better about what you are doing.

I understand very clearly we got enough vacant land in Detroit right now to feed ourselves for miles. One block at a time. So, if every block had a community garden or two, or three, no one in this block should go hungry. If we got a community garden or two or three on every block, what problems would we have with fresh food distribution?



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MARIA JONES-FOSTER

I've been at Davison School for 18 years now. About ten years ago I started a garden with another teacher there. It started off as a tree farm many years ago. Then around 2005 another teacher and I installed a few raised beds and began gardening with her class. Unfortunately that teacher was sent to another school. So, about three years ago, I got a group of kids together - fourth and fifth graders - and started the school garden club.

The kids like it a lot and are always anxious to start in the spring. They are dedicated. They like using the equipment, the supplies, they like seeing things grow. Unfortunately every once in a while there is some vandalism in the garden but that's a lesson to be learned too. They like eating the stuff out of the garden. I tried to make them aware of all the little bugs and the things that we need that are in the garden naturally. We look at the trees and at the birds and talk about how the seeds are food for the birds. We've done art in the garden by making signs with the kids. We decorated the beds with them. They are really positive.

We have special needs kids at our school, hearing impaired and learning disabled so I try to make sure kids from those classes are involved also. This year we expanded because I wanted the garden club to be active more during the school year rather than just March to June so we changed the name to Earth Saver's Garden Club and we made a video about recycling.

I had a student that was in the garden club in fourth and fifth grade. The fourth graders take the place of the fifth graders when they move up to the middle school and the practice had been that

middle schoolers did not participate. But this one young lady said, "We should have sixth graders, sixth graders should be allowed to be in the garden club. If we were in the garden club this year we should be able to do it next year." So I said "Well, I'm telling you what the principal told me but if you want to be in it when you get in sixth grade, you have to go ask the principal." So she did. And the principal said yes, she would approve middle schoolers participating in garden club. They get so involved in it that they want to continue and I think that's a good thing.



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Keep Growing Detroit has many opportunities for learning. The classes they have are really helpful. I haven't been able to volunteer as much as I have in the past but I just enjoy being around the people and being around the plants and being in the green houses and being in the sun. It's just really nice.

I garden because I like being outside. I like watching things grow; it's a way to be productive, and eat healthier knowing where the food came from. I do eat more fruits and vegetables than I used to. When I get outside it

always makes me feel better. I went to the school one morning to water the garden. I put the sprinklers on and I just stood there watching and adjusting and watching. And then somebody said, "Why are you standing there and watching that thing?" Because to me it's pretty and calming.

It's some kind of miracle that makes what comes up from these teeny little seeds grow to be what they are. It's not just the gardening; I enjoy the birds and the trees, and even the weeds. It gives you more to be thankful for, you know there is more out there, another dimension.

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RUFINO VARGAS

Working with the land, it's not easy—I do everything by hand. I love my peppers and corn. The first thing is economy. In the summer I don't buy tomatoes or peppers. I grow my own; I have my own flavor in my food. I grow my own garlic and onions. I had a lot of hot peppers because we eat [food] very hot in Mexico.

I fill my kitchen. I feed three families with my gardens. I sell to my friends. If I need some money to buy some tools, I sell my produce and I make money. Last year I made \$1,000 dollars from selling my produce. I save a lot — for three or four months from the store I buy only the meat. I have garlic, onions, tomato, lettuce, peppers, herbs. Michigan is a good place to grow. Since I started my garden my sugar levels went down. I lost weight. I think I lost ten lbs. I improved my mood.

I find my own person, my spirit working in the garden. Kids, they learn how to respect my garden. They see how I work. They learn how to work because they help me. They take home eggplant. They are learning to respect another. After my garden I saw a lot of people start doing gardens. I have a lot of flowers. One guy came and said, 'I want some flowers for my wife but I don't have any money.' I give him.

I don't make too much money but if I make extra money I can pay someone to help me. Some people ask me for job but I can't pay the regular rate but I can give them vegetables. Market gardening every Saturday, for me, it's extra money. I make 70 dollars a week most times but one week it was \$140.

My goal for this year is to grow more than \$10,000 in produce. When I reach this goal I want to get \$20,000. I want to buy more lots from the city. My main customers are the Mexicans because I grow a lot of hot peppers. I grow ethic produce like papalo. I find the market; they find me.



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MARTHA PRESSLEY

Last year I had a bout with cancer. I couldn't even bend my back. But I brought cancer under remission by eating fresh vegetables out of my garden. I ate kale, brussels sprouts, dandelion leaf; I just packed them all together in my blender, turned it on and put my fruit in, and drank it every day. And you know, when I went to my doctor, he said, 'Your tumors are still shrinking and you're not even taking the chemo anymore.' It just blew his mind.

I'm feeling better now; my health is excellent. I can bend over and touch my toes, I can do things that I hadn't been able to do even before going on the chemo.

You know, the greatest thing about this whole thing is I didn't have to spend a dime on vegetables the whole winter because I packaged up all my kale and fresh vegetables from the garden. Gardening is a great way of saving your money. Saving those \$20-30 dollars a week I didn't have to worry and think, can I afford to buy that bunch of kale? The staple things that I use, I had them in the freezer.

What keeps me gardening is the health benefits and the connection with nature— I cannot tell you how great I feel when I am in the midst of that garden. Sometimes I go into the community garden and I stand in the middle of it and just feel the spiritual connection. It is so uplifting, It is so enlightening. It makes me feel close to God.

I've this dream to have a beautiful flower garden across the street in front of my house. I want to see a flower garden in front of my house before I leave the planet. Even though we are an old neighborhood and old neighborhoods have just really gone down, there are people who live in those houses that maybe cannot afford to get certain things done.

That's where Keep Growing Detroit comes in. They have been able to give me seeds; I can go to them and get tools if something breaks; they are there to assist me if I have any questions. The one thing is it's been kind of hard to get people out in the community garden because our community is kind of empty. I'm on Helen Street; I enjoy living here; there are not a lot of houses, I just feel like I am out on Belle Isle. I believe beauty can be wherever. So what if we don't have a lot of houses? We got more space.



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