

# Community gardening

by Joan Boram  
special writer

In 1893, Detroit was in the midst of a depression, and unemployment was rife. Mayor Hazen Pingree called upon affluent citizens who owned vacant property within the city to allow needy people to grow food on the land. He also provided vacant city land for the same purpose, and used city funds to buy seed and seed potato for the poor.

For his trouble, he was disparagingly referred to as "Potato Patch Pingree," and Detroit became known as a hotbed of socialism.

A little more than a century later, community gardens are an integral part of many cities and towns in the area. As in Pingree's time, they're a source of healthful food, sometimes for people who enjoy the camaraderie of laboring out-of-doors with friends and neighbors. And who doesn't enjoy a friendly rivalry as to who gets the first tomato or the biggest pumpkin?

The community gardens in Westland have been twice recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records as the largest in the world. The Wayne County Citizens Gardening Program was started in 1974 on the grounds of what had been the Eloise County Hospital complex in Westland, after most of the old buildings were torn down. The 475 plots are sited

on 30 acres of county land, and are available to citizens of Wayne County who are over the age of 55.

"We vie for first position with Dayton, Ohio," says Frank Rembisz, director of the Wayne County Program on Aging. "We plow some more land, and then they plow some more land, so the title goes back and forth. The last time we were listed was in 1990."

Master Gardener Jean Barr "sort of" oversees the gardens and the gardeners.

"As much as anybody can tell 300 senior citizens what to do," Barr says cheerfully. "Many of our seniors credit the garden program with keeping them out of the doctor's office. Not only do they have fresh vegetables to eat and to preserve, but they get good exercise in the fresh air, and they have a community of other gardeners to relate to."

The gardeners have access to a greenhouse where they grow their own seedlings. They begin to reconvene there right after the holidays.

"Even those who don't grow their own seedlings show up for the conviviality," Barr says.

In the middle of September, the Wayne County gardeners hold a harvest festival on the grounds.

"It's a big pot luck dinner," Barr says. "We have a lot of nationalities represented here, and they bring their national



Doda Sinishaj, left, of Livonia, has been planting at the Greenmead Historical Village for 10 years now, while Michael Kendrick, right, also of Livonia, tried his hand last year at vegetables like tomatoes, lettuce and cabbage, in his first year as a community gardener.

dishes. The Laotians bring their foods, the Arabic gardeners bring a whole roasted lamb, among other dishes, and we have soul food, and hillbilly food and northern food — we've never been low on food. Everyone is welcome, but it's pot luck, so we ask you bring something to put on the table."

The West Bloomfield community gardens are on land that has been loaned to the community since 1974 by Herman and Barbara Frankel. The 162 20-square-foot plots are available to any West Bloomfield resident.

"They fill up every year and there has

been an increasing demand as people move into condos or apartments," says Patty Riney, of the West Bloomfield Dept. of Parks and Recreation.

Gardeners can have more than one plot — one woman has four, but Riney says the department would restrict the number of plots if other applicants had to be turned away because of shortages. Those who participate, she says, find their common ground in gardening.

People have a good time in their gar-

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