

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

INSPIRED EFFORT

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Post-Dispatch Garden
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TO GARDEN as a group, members must get along. And the 30 or so volunteers with **Olivette in Bloom** do just that, even though their leader, Esther Pruett, says, "We found it's really hard for a committee to design a garden.

"We all discovered," she adds, "that we each have our favorite plants and other plants that we don't like as much."

But they've cooperated so well over the past two years that they brought home to Olivette a first-place prize in the 2002 Great Garden Contest's category of "best garden tended by a group."

After recent city-council disputes over, among other things, proposed commercial development, Pruett and company thought it was time to do some good. "A lot of us have lived here a long time and are very devoted to Olivette," she says. "We felt that we needed to do something positive for our community." They took inspiration from a more established gardening group, the 17-year-old U-City in Bloom. "It's just fantastic what they've done," she says. "I called a diverse group of people here, and we all put in a modest amount of money and talked to the city administrator."

The first line of attack was Veterans Memorial Park, "a sadly neglected corner," she says, at Olive Boulevard and Dielman Avenue. Built in the late 1960s, it had a fountain, small plaza and plaque dedicated to veterans of the town. Gardeners went to work, emptying a back bed of "overgrown, unsuccessful day lilies and grasses," says Pruett, and asking the city and the Missouri Department of Transportation crews to help them remove two diseased river birches and four untrimmed yews.

Bulbs and mums went into the beds that first fall. With a few more thousand dollars raised from residents, the gardeners purchased perennials to replace more labor-intensive annuals.

Now, hostas fill parts of the shade beds that aren't inhabited by such Missouri natives as columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*) and purple coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*). In sun, there is the sedum 'Matrona' and several new 'Disco Bell' hibiscus plants (*Hibiscus moscheutos*), plus ever-blooming shrub roses called 'Chuckles' and edgings by a blue-flowered, creeping ground cover called 'Blue Daze' (*Evolvulus glomerata*).

Already, the corner's plants have suffered the indignity of a car's tires plowing through them. Exhaust year-round and salt in winter add to the gardening challenges. The group has two new perennial beds in nearby Stacy Park that are a bit more protected.

But the crowning glory is Veterans Memorial Park, which "went from really ugly and nothing," says Pruett, "to something that had people stopping us and saying, 'This is really beautiful, thank you,' which was gratification enough, if you're a volunteer."

Just this kind of inspired effort is what group gardening is all about, says contest judge Dianne O'Connell, a horticulturist and instructor at the University of St. Louis at Meramec.

Community gardens, she says, "help each other evolve by passing ideas from one to another. They're a way for communities not only to work together but also to take from each other's positiveness."

In this category of the garden contest, O'Connell adds, "I liked the diversity of the plant material. It's getting better as we become more knowledgeable of plants that do well in St. Louis. People have to get out of the mold of saying, 'It won't grow here,' because there are plenty of plants that will grow here -- cultivars that are tried and true for heat and humidity."

WALTER RUSH certainly knows about plants that survive.

His two blocks of community garden on Lee Avenue, just east of North Kingshighway, are packed with hardy natives, other wildflowers, trees, shrubs and disease-resistant roses.

The garden, named 472-E for its designated block-unit in the Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis' federation of such blocks, also has long rows of peonies donated by a neighbor, plus the helping hands of Rush's mother, Margaret Rush, who plants, waters and does other chores.

But Rush also knows about gardening communally from the example set by others.

Seven years ago, when he wanted to do something with the vacant lots that, he says, "began to be an eyesore" when city crews didn't cut grass there, he found Rosa Little.

She was another active gardener in the Penrose neighborhood. Someone at Operation Brightside told Rush about her. Together, they applied for and got a \$1,500 grant -- and plants -- from the Missouri Department of Conservation. City crews came in to tear out old turf and replace it with truckloads of new topsoil. Gateway Greening helped with more plants. This year, the block-unit garden won an honorable mention in what was the very competitive category of "gardens tended by a group." It's won other prizes, as well, including two "Block is Beautiful" awards from the Urban League.

Rush, a corrections officer at the city workhouse, does the lion's share of the work. Most mornings, you'll see his 6-foot, 5-inch frame bent over poppies and roses, weeding away. Some Saturdays, a crew from the workhouse is there to help out. "I don't have any gardening skills," Rush says. "I just try to straighten things up in the neighborhood."

Mary P. Harris, 80 and a resident across the street from the garden, is delighted with the results.

"I was so glad they did it," she says. "I don't have to worry about it anymore. It makes nice scenery, and it's a pleasure to come out on my front."

IN A similar vein, Ann Sheehan Lipton is relieved to see that her two daughters and other children at New City School have a fountain, flowers and green spaces on school property where, she says, there had been "a failed garden in the past." Sheehan Lipton actually designed this garden. And it's tended, in part, by schoolchildren, teachers and neighbors. It won second place in group-gardening. A master gardener via a joint program of the University of Missouri Outreach and Extension Service and the Missouri Botanical Garden, Sheehan Lipton got interested in such a project by watching her oldest daughter, Madeline, out on the school's grounds.

"She and other kids sort of played on their own," Sheehan Lipton says, "and it seemed to me that they were searching for something naturalist to look at, like roly-poly bugs. It's amazing how much bang for your buck a kid gets with roly-polies."

The mother's conversations with New City School Principal Tom Hoerr took the idea of a garden beyond a few raised beds.

She planned a dry creek bed coursing under a very large, child-friendly log, next to a round, walk-through fountain, sunny perennial beds, pathways and a small boulder field. The plan got donations from parents and neighbors.

It's been a year or so in the making, but this new garden is finally filling out with hardy plants. They are ones that Sheehan Lipton says "don't require a lot of hand-holding."

Native switchgrasses back up borders edged with Missouri primrose and filled in with young bunches of purple coneflower, rudbeckia, wild ginger and Lenten rose. Classes tend to four raised beds of vegetable seedlings.

"Kids volunteer to weed," she says, "and are digging and finding things under rocks. It's really fun to see the sort of playground that I never had."

VITO'S GARDEN, the third-place winner in the group-gardening category, is now a memorial to Vito Ponticello, owner of the lot in University City where a neighborhood garden grows.

He was killed two years ago in an auto accident.

His three daughters, says garden leader Wendy Surinsky, "very generously allow us to continue to garden there."

Surinsky says she and other area apartment dwellers went looking for a place to grow vegetables and flowers about seven years ago.

Through Gateway Greening, they found that three different community gardens were forming on blocks just north of The Loop. They picked Vito's and now jointly grow big patches of asparagus, blackberries and raspberries there.

Each gardener also has a raised bed for vegetables or flowers or both.

Surinsky's bent is definitely floral. She started with dianthus, petunias and cosmos and then, poppies.

"It was my first garden," says the librarian and creative-writing instructor. "I really wanted to plant some flowers from seed. It seemed more magical to me."

With poppies, she struggled. She read everything she could, started seedlings indoors, babied them when she transplanted and even "made these little shade guards around these little threadlike sprouts."

One clump of brilliant red-orange flowers made it. And the poppies have bloomed ever since. "It's thrilling," she says.

Her fellow gardeners, who grow tomatoes and herbs and keep clematis and purple poppy mallow going around the "Vito's Garden" sign are, she says, a diverse group

of African and Italian Americans, Algerians and Russians, ranging in age from "20 into their 70s." Master gardener Claire Linzee and the Parkview Neighborhood Association have helped, as well. "I feel like this is a tremendous lesson in community and rootedness and fertility," Surinsky says, "and I would say it's absolutely one of the most important experiences in my entire life."

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BEST GARDEN TENDED BY A GROUP

1st place

Olivette in Bloom, led by Esther V. Pruett, Olivette

2nd place

New City School Centennial Garden, designed by Ann Sheehan Lipton and maintained, in part, by schoolchildren, St. Louis

3rd place

Vito's Garden, led by Wendy Surinsky, University City

Honorable mention

Block Unit 472-E garden on Lee Avenue, led by Walter Rush, St. Louis; Soulard Restoration Group, corner of 12th Street and Gravois Boulevard, led by George C. Grove Jr., St. Louis; Mississippi Avenue, from Chouteau Avenue to Hickory Street, led by Linda Weiner, St. Louis

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Still to come -- more garden contest winners

HERE IS a schedule of upcoming Lifestyle stories on other winners in the Post-Dispatch Great Garden Contest (listed by date of publication):

- * July 6, "Best Water Garden" category.
- * July 13, "Most Creative Use of Space."
- * July 20, "Best Garden Photography."
- * July 27, "Best Native Plant Garden."

(1) Color Photo by JERRY NAUNHEIM JR. / POST-DISPATCH - **Olivette in Bloom** took first place in the Great Garden Contest's category of "gardens tended by a group" with its renovation of shade and sun beds in Veterans Memorial Park, Olive Boulevard and Dielman Road.

(2) Color Photo by JERRY NAUNHEIM JR. / POST-DISPATCH - The part of Veterans Park closest to Olive Boulevard features purple coneflower, salvia, zinnias and a number of other sun-loving plants.

(3) Color Photo by JERRY NAUNHEIM JR. / POST-DISPATCH - Volunteer members of **Olivette in Bloom** number about 30 and have raised several thousand dollars to renew gardens on city property.

(4) Color Photo by KAREN ELSHOUT / POST-DISPATCH - Rush and his mother, Margaret, stand in the garden they helped create with a state grant, some city labor and help from local groups such as the Urban League and Gateway Greening.

(5) Color Photo by KAREN ELSHOUT / POST-DISPATCH - Walter Rush purchased several shrub roses (this bloom comes from one of them) for a community garden just east of the intersection of Lee Avenue and North Kingshighway. The garden won honorable mention in the group-gardening category of the 2002 Great Garden Contest.

(6) Photo by JERRY NAUNHEIM JR. / POST-DISPATCH - Master gardener Rhonda Porche-Sorbet teaches children about soils in the New City School garden, 5209 Waterman Boulevard. The garden won second place in the group-garden category.

(7) Color Photo by TRISHA SIDDENS - Gardeners at Vito's Garden -- 3rd-place winner in the group-garden category -- include, clockwise from rear left: Boris Zolotarev, Zoya Zolotareva, Michael Paruch, Jenny Slosar, Wendy Surinsky, Naum Lukashevsky and Nikolas Ostropolsky. The Leland Avenue garden in University City is in memory of Vito Ponticello, who gardened there before his death. His family still owns the land.

(8) Color Photo by KAREN ELSHOUT / POST-DISPATCH - Poppies and dianthus join roses and other flowering shrubs in the city garden tended by Walter Rush and his mother, Margaret.

(9) Color Photo by KAREN ELSHOUT / POST-DISPATCH - A clump of big betony, the common name for the perennial with spikes of tubular flowers and scalloped leaves (*Stachys macrantha*), also grows in the Lee Avenue garden.

(10) Color Photo by JERRY NAUNHEIM JR./ POST-DISPATCH - Another aspect of the child-friendly garden at New City School is a fountain that spurts small bursts of water from a number of different spigots.