

# Cucumbers and Cannas

LUSH COMMUNAL GREEN SPACES AND QUIRKY HOME GARDENS ARE THE NORM IN CHICAGO'S BOWMANVILLE NEIGHBORHOOD TODAY, A FAR CRY FROM ITS ORIGINS AS A COMMUNITY BUILT AROUND A PICKLE FACTORY.

STORY BY **CATHY JEAN MALONEY** PHOTOGRAPHY BY **RON CAPEK**



Top: Unusual foundation plantings grace this charming bungalow while the backyard garden (above) makes great use of vertical plantings on a fence.

“Come when you can, leave when you want.”

This easygoing slogan of the ad hoc gardening group of Bowmanville’s Community Organization (BCO) reflects its welcoming ethos yet belies its impressive achievements. Although Bowmanville, a north Chicago neighborhood just west of Andersonville, does not have an official garden club, its beautiful community green spaces and quirky private gardens tell a different story.

Through some spirited alchemy of darn good soil and volunteer elbow grease, Bowmanville blooms with plants often known to be finicky in Chicagoland. Consider the experience of Craig Hanenburg, for example, a self-professed “computer guy” who won “Best in Show” in Bowmanville’s 2008

“Everybody’s looking for something new, or something that they want for containers.”

—Craig Hanenburg

Garden Walk and organized the 2009 event last July. Hanenburg, formerly of Denver, said he “couldn’t do broadleaf rhododendron” in the Rocky Mountain state, but the picky plants flourish in his Bowmanville garden.

Huh? Rhododendrons in Chicago? “Bowmanville has really nice, loamy soil,” Hanenburg says modestly. There must be something to that. Thanks to the area’s good drainage and elevation, Rosehill Cemetery, one of Chicago’s first professionally landscaped public

## neighborhoods

spaces, was founded on the northern edge of Bowmanville in the 1850s. The sandy soil also proved perfect for growing cucumbers, including those at Bowmanville's famous Budlong pickle farm, once the largest in the world in the late 1800s.

Today, however, Bowmanville gardeners are as likely to grow cannas as cucumbers. "Everybody's looking for something new, or something that they want for containers," says Hanenburg. Flower aficionados will travel great distances for their plants, and "search all over the city," he says. Gethsemene Garden Center on north Clark Street and Pesches in Des Plaines are favorites, but Bowmanvillers have been known to go as far as Peotone for the right plant.

While constrained within the limits of a typical city lot, Bowmanville gardens exhibit great variety with whimsical objets d'art and personal expressions of beauty. Vertical >>



Bowmanville  
Community  
Garden

## WHERE IS BOWMANVILLE?

Locals and some guidebooks refer to Bowmanville as part of greater Lincoln Square, but City of Chicago maps put it just north of Ravenswood, wedged between Andersonville and Budlong Woods. The neighborhood boundaries are Ravenswood Avenue, Foster Avenue, Western Avenue and Rosehill Cemetery.

For more information on Bowmanville, and its annual July garden walk, visit the Bowmanville Community Organization website at [www.bcochicago.org](http://www.bcochicago.org).

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Colorful garden rooms are created in this backyard through clever seating walls and trellises, mixed hardscaping materials, and a jaunty coat of red paint on the detached garage.

## IN A PICKLE

In May, 1890, an oil lamp exploded in a factory stable and the raging fire nearly brought down the entire town of Bowmanville, then consisting of 60 homes. Budlong Brothers' pickle farm, the community's main industry, burned to the ground. Since 1857 when Lyman and Joseph Budlong built their first pickle bottling plant, this cucumber and onion farm had become the neighborhood's largest employer. The fire was devastating, but not the first challenge the Budlongs faced. Blight often affected the crops, with a boom and bust effect on owners and workers alike. In the 1860s, cucumbers were still prime suspects as agents of cramp, colic, and other illnesses; demand for the vegetable needed to be cultivated.

Eventually, cucumbers were consumed with relish, and the Budlongs consistently rebounded. By the early 1900s, packed with immigrant laborers, the so-called "pickle train" departed from Clybourn Junction to Budlongs' 700 acre farm. A picker earned from \$1.75 to \$2.00 per day. At harvest, Budlongs, said to be the largest pickle enterprise in the country, employed 1,200 workers and produced 12,000 bushels per day of cucumbers and onions. Along with a ham sandwich on black bread, the popular "penny pickle," 2 inches in diameter and 6 to 7 inches long, became the staple of every working man's lunch pail.

Ultimately, population growth trumped the pickle, and Bowmanville was annexed to the city. The Budlong farm was subdivided into the neighborhood of Budlong Woods and the penny pickle went the way of the ten cent cup of coffee.



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### ROSEHILL: A ROSE BY ANY NAME

Despite its flowery sound, Rosehill is actually a misspelling of Roe's Hill, named after a local businessman. Chicago's oldest and largest non-sectarian cemetery, Rosehill, founded in 1859, was designed by preeminent landscape artist William Saunders of Philadelphia. Saunders, (1822-1900), the USDA's first botanist, also designed many of Washington D.C.'s parks and the Gettysburg cemetery. With its winding roads and lush greenery, Rosehill became a destination for Victorians seeking a natural respite. Today, as in years past, visitors admire Rosehill's mature landscape and the artful sculpture of its monuments.

>> gardening is popular, with trellises, walls, metal sculptures, hanging plants and bird feeders. With all this variety, Hanenburg says familiar flowers and plants nonetheless dominate many gardens: "A lot of them seem like your grandma's farm garden."

Community gardening is big in Bowmanville. "People tend to do the little corners of the streets," Hanenburg reports. Gardeners who live at the end of the blocks extend their gardens to the corner parkways and plant peonies and cosmos, and, in some newer gardens, native Illinois grasses.

Three large community gardens benefit from volunteer help. The Bowmanville Community Garden, a 1st place winner in Mayor Daley's Community Landscape Award program, showcases ornamental grasses and colorful perennials in a raised bed edged with dry set tumbled pavers. The Gateway Garden features individual vegetable plots assigned to community residents. Westgate Garden transformed some concrete curbs designed to slow traffic into bountiful perennial planters. The Bowmanville Community Organization sponsors specific garden work days, but with the camaraderie and calming landscape effects, it's hard to "leave when you must." 🌱



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