



# Old Sites, New Gardens

From the far north to the far south side of the city, Chicago residents in four separate neighborhoods have picked up their shovels and transformed wasteland into productive gardens.

By Christopher Weber

In the north side Chicago neighborhood of Bowmanville, vegetable plots line the Union Pacific-North right-of-way with leafy promise. There is a pergola, a wood chipped footpath, infant cedar trees, and compost bins—the hallmarks of a robust community garden. Not so long ago, this strip of railway land looked very different. A derelict lot piled deep with construction scrap, chunks of concrete and old tires, it didn't contain a rumor of green.

That it produces tomatoes today is a small miracle, one that's being replicated by diverse groups of ambitious, can-do Chicago gardeners. Throughout the city's neighborhoods, these community enthusiasts are planting gardens on old, vacant sites.

Gardening on reclaimed urban land presents special challenges. Old sites are often smothered beneath impermeable groundcover like asphalt or gravel. Not surprisingly, such soil lacks nutrients and may harbor contaminants like lead.

This railroad garden isn't the first unorthodox project for Bowmanville resident Betty Redmond and her neighbors. In 1996, they installed a decorative garden along Rosehill Cemetery, which borders their neighborhood on the north. Planted in stages, the garden gained 80 trees, seating areas, shrubs, perennials and ornamental grasses—all in a strip of parkway barely 10 feet deep. Ornamental pears and dogwood surround a trellis bearing trumpet vine. Natives like wild aster and wild geranium have found the garden, as have serviceberries. "Because the native plants are coming back, we've begun to attract more butterflies," says Redmond, who masterminded this garden. "We have goldfinch flocks that feed on our purple coneflower. Hummingbirds come to the trumpet vine."

Bowmanville's gardens have also helped cultivate neighborhood pride. "The gardens are a very public way for this community to make its presence known," adds Redmond. "This community is not just a bunch of houses. There are people here who are committed to a certain quality of life in the city. The gardens say that for us."

## Gardens on Track

Railroad right-of-ways are particularly popular sites for reclaimed gardens. Around the same time that Bowmanville residents planted their railway garden, members of the Ravenswood Fellowship United Methodist Church established three vegetable beds along the same railroad tracks two miles south, near Sunnyside.

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You can't get much nittier and grittier than this. An abandoned lot by the Dan Ryan Expressway, used as a dumping ground for old cars and contaminants—and then one day, a shady grove where neighbors can relax and their children can frolic. It didn't happen overnight, of course, but that it happened at all is some kind of miracle, thanks to the coordinated hard work of Al DiFranco, his fellow Pilsen worker-bees, NeighborSpace and the city of Chicago. They call their garden The Emerald Triangle, after the nearby street.

## What to Plant

Here are Jamie Zaplatosch's favorite things to plant in reclaimed gardens.

### Annuals

(All are self-reseeding for ease on maintenance.)

- Johnny jump ups
- Alyssum
- Calendula
- Snapdragons
- Dill

### Perennials

- Purple coneflower (*Echinacea*)
- Switchgrass (*Panicum*)
- Spiderwort (*Tradescantia*)
- Asters (any)
- Creeping phlox (*Subulata*)

## Getting Started

**S**cout the site thoroughly. Does it have a water source? Is it covered with junk? Is the soil starved for nutrients? None of these challenges is insurmountable, but it's good to know what you're getting into.

**Find out who owns the land.** Your alderman can be helpful. Of go to [www.cookcountyassessor.com/Property\\_Search/Property\\_Search.aspx](http://www.cookcountyassessor.com/Property_Search/Property_Search.aspx) and type in the address of the property to get its pin number. You will then need to do further research at City Hall, in the County side of the building.

**Look into its history.** Ask neighbors to learn what previously occupied the site of your proposed garden. If it's something chemical-intensive like a gas station or dry cleaner, you may want to consider a different site. Zaplatosch notes that contaminants affect people as much or more so than planted vegetables. If there's not an actual barrier on the ground—whether it's mulch or grass or clay—you're inhaling those contaminants if it's hot and dusty and the wind's blowing.

**Test the soil.** Take samples from multiple places in the prospective garden.

## Resources

- NeighborSpace acquires land for community gardens. [www.neighbor-space.org](http://www.neighbor-space.org), 312-431-9406
- Greencorps Chicago donates free seeds, bulbs and plants as well as technical help to community gardens. 312-744-8691
- STAT Analysis does soil testing. [www.statanalysis.com](http://www.statanalysis.com). 312/733-0551

"We went through the alderman's office [for approval]," explains Gary Hougen, the church's pastor. "They checked with Metra, which said there would be no problem as long as we could yield during track work."

Before planting, the Ravenswood church members sent soil samples to a lab to check for possible contamination. "Our testing disclosed high levels of anthracitic compounds, which are toxic," Hougen recounts. "They leach out of chunks of asphalt and coal tar tossed overboard by the railroads in the 1800s." Accordingly, the church gardeners planted their carrot, parsnip, and other seeds in compost-filled raised beds. The beds have a layer of pebbles beneath them to allow drainage while keeping the roots from reaching the contaminated soil below.

Gardeners should pay special attention to lead levels, according to Openlands' Jaime Zaplatosch, who has installed hundreds of successful gardens on old sites. "Lead is an indicator metal," she explains. "If you have high levels of lead, then you most likely have high levels of some other contaminant as well." Zaplatosch says that many Chicago gardeners send soil samples to a lab called STAT Analysis because of its convenient West Loop location and reasonable fees (\$18 for a lead test).

It's also possible to take a *laissez faire* approach that avoids this work if planting non-edibles. Zaplatosch sowed a batch of leftover seeds and plugs on an abandoned railroad embankment near her East Garfield home. The natives, including columbine and goldenrod, are still developing, but she hopes that they will flourish without watering or care. "These are free seeds. I'm just going to see what happens."

### A Tree Grows in Pilsen

This laid-back spirit is manifest in a half-acre arboretum that provides much-needed foliage in Pilsen—Douglas fir, white and Austrian pine, American beech, hawthorns, and half-a-dozen cottonwoods descended from the giant specimen across the street. Rows of honey locust and ash peek over the Dan Ryan viaduct above.

The arboretum, which took root two decades ago, was planted through the efforts of Al DiFranco, a commercial photographer whose home looked out on what was then a



**One of the great, undeniable benefits of building a garden is that it builds community. On the far, far south side of Chicago, at Hoxie and 106th St., a group of guys started puttering around on the site of a former tavern, planting a bit of this and a bit of that, and pretty soon they had a place for neighborhood picnics and a welcome shelter from the sometimes mean streets outside.**





The space along railroad tracks can be turned into prime garden real estate, but be sure to get a green light from your alderman, the railroad (in this case Metra), and then make sure the soil is safe. When the members of the Ravenswood Fellowship United Methodist Church learned that the space they wanted to use for vegetable growing was contaminated with “anthracitic compounds,” they went to Plan B and built raised beds instead.

**“Because the native plants are coming back, we’ve begun to attract more butterflies,”**

—Betty Redmond

to keep vines from strangling natives like prairie dock and compass plant. “It’s like a guy wearing long hair—you have to trim it every now and then for the sake of appearances.”

### **Blooming From the Ruins**

Few sites better illustrate the transformative power of reclaimed gardens than the Hoxie Prairie Garden on the far South Side. A corner tavern had stood on the site at 106th and Hoxie until 1972, when it burned. The lot then sat vacant for three decades. Weeds grew tall. Vagrants camped amid the rubble.

Today, a dedicated group of men—Jimmy Fernandez, Roberto Reyes, Manuel Garcia, Enrique Gonzalez, and Nicolas Aguado—grows a little bit of everything here: yucca and dogwoods, lamb’s ear and roses, hostas and maples. A ceramic troll lounges beside a mini well house. There are tiki torches and plastic pinwheel daisies, a barbeque pit and picnic tables. Although it won one of Mayor Daley’s landscape awards in 2009, it feels comfortable, like someone’s backyard.

And in a sense, it is. Neighbors gather here for picnics and parties. “The minute you walk in, you lose track of time. You’re transported,” says gardener Enrique Gonzalez. “As soon as you leave the garden, you run into gang activity and the neighborhood’s problems. But in the garden, you’re safe.” 🌱

sand-and-gravel lot. An illegal dump and chop shop had occupied the site for years. When authorities finally shut it down, DiFranco seized the opportunity and began clearing and planting the space and named it the Emerald Triangle for its location location along Emerald Avenue just south of 21st Street. “It’s a chunk of forest in the city,” he boasts.

Not only is the land recycled—the trees are, too. The city transplanted the Douglas firs here from a rail corridor. The beech came from St. James Cathedral, and the Illinois Department of Transportation donated the pines as well as hardy natives that tolerate the heavy salt spray in winter.

NeighborSpace now owns the lot and gives DiFranco and his volunteers great latitude in caring for it. “What we’re doing is creating new soil,” he says of the thick, spongy carpet of wood-chips donated by local tree services. DiFranco uses a mower

## **Best practices**

The stewards of these gardens say there are several keys to reclaiming old sites.

### **Put the word out**

“Let your neighbors know what you’re redoing,” urges Openlands’ Jaime Zaplatosch. “The more you talk to neighbors and are just out there physically maintaining the garden, the better.”

Zaplatosch adds that public workers are not always aware of approved gardening projects, and may inadvertently use pesticides. “Put up some kind of sign on both ends of the garden saying, ‘This is a garden, please don’t spray.’ If you’re gardening near a railway, make sure that the signs face the tracks, where sprayers pass. Keep in mind that tall plants like sunflowers can block sightlines and draw complaints.

### **Accommodate diverse needs**

Says Betty Redmond of Bowmanville: “We have a path for dog walkers. We’re not excluding anybody’s previous use of the property.” Likewise, try to work telephone poles, storm drains, and fire hydrants into your layout.

### **Find allies**

Organizations like NeighborSpace and Greencorps Chicago can provide guidance, funding, and even plants. Reach out to any landscapers or tree surgeons in the neighborhood.

### **Shrug off setbacks**

A little good humor can help you ride out the problems endemic to a new garden. “Nineteen cucumbers disappeared one evening,” Redmond remembers with a laugh. “But if we can grow enough produce, a little bit going missing shouldn’t bother us.”