

UP FRONT



NEIGHBORHOOD STORIES

By Bette McDevitt

Old Allegheny Gardens' Randy Gilson

North Side, Pittsburgh, Pa.

“WANTED: Seasonal relationship with someone who doesn't mind history with a little dirt” reads a recent flyer posted in the Mexican War Streets neighborhood of Pittsburgh's North Side.

The Old Allegheny Gardens, going on now for 25 years, are a pleasing jumble, like the neighborhood in which they flourish. An eclectic mixture of residents lives in comfortably close quarters in the Mexican War Streets, which have names like Palo Alto and Monterey. These houses, some still on cobblestone streets, were home to early German immigrants.

The community gardens themselves are on vacant lots stretching across Sherman and Arch streets, which were donated for garden use by former residents. They create a peaceful, magical place in the midst of these urban streets, with an assortment of raised and flat beds, tomato plants and roses, magnolias and pole beans clinging to twisted metal sculpture. Brick paths help visitors gracefully meander from one end to the other.

Nothing is wasted. A metal mailbox holds hand tools. Metal furniture and granite benches, rescued from dumpsters and landfills, hunker down on Belgian block, terracotta, whole brick, and half brick. You

might see residents enjoying a game of checkers on this recycled furniture in the shade of a tree. Children come to the gardens like bees to pollen, and Laura Winter, a resident gardener has set aside an area for a children's garden and helps them plant and

tend their vegetables and flowers every year.

But beneath the lush greenery, rampant growth, and twittering birds, there is order, and it comes from Randy Gilson, who started the gardens in 1982.

“That,” says Gilson, pointing to a yellow



Randy Gilson started the community gardens from scratch in 1982. All photos Bette McDevitt.



The yellow picket fence serves as Randy Gilson's aura when he isn't at the gardens.

picket fence decorated with pink flowers and pineapples surrounding the gardens, "is my aura." People wanted me to be here all the time, so I painted that fence and my aura is around the garden all the time."

As we walk through, Randy picks up litter, pulls weeds, and greets every person who passes by. "Since I've been here, I've put in over 800 gardens," Randy says. "That includes all the whiskey barrels with flowers scattered around the streets, eight small parks, and over 50 vegetable gardens in a 20-block area."

Blond, fair-skinned, and ageless, Randy glows like the sun. He lives two blocks from the gardens in a yellow three-story house that he calls "Randyland." When Randy set out to

establish the community gardens, he began with simple ground rules. People must prepare the soil within the month of April, after receiving notification that they have a plot. During the growing season, they must weed at least one hour a week and at the end of the season, they must clean out their space. Randy hopes they don't plant invasive plants that take over. The aura has eyes.

If gardeners are lax in caring for their gardens, they may find their plants uprooted and returned in a box on their doorsteps. This, after repeated warnings. "I have 15 or 20 people waiting every year to be in the garden," says Randy, "so we don't need to put up with that."

There are 40 10-by-20-foot plots, and

the cost of a full plot is \$30 a season, which covers the cost of water coming from a hose hooked up to a large warehouse next to the gardens. In the past, Randy has secured some funds from the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy, which sponsors plantings throughout the region.

Randy has one last bit of advice for gardeners: "Be willing to let some things go. Plant vegetables and flowers, so that if something is taken, you'll always have a handful of flowers." ❁

Bette McDevitt previously wrote the feature articles "Love Letters from a Chauffeur," "The Thomas Merton Center: Changing Lives One at a Time," and "Showstoppers" for this magazine.