

Gardening to Save Detroit

By Michele Owens

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Photo: Francesco Lagnese

Ducks. Rabbits. Chickens. Vegetable gardens. No, it's not a patch of rural America—it's Detroit, and it just might be showing other towns across America how to regenerate, blossom, and thrive.



Step through the front doors of the Catherine Ferguson Academy in Detroit, and you've entered what seems to be a typically cash-starved inner-city school: dimly lit, with lockers painted the

color of pea soup, lots of dingy old wood, and nothing even remotely luxurious or high-tech in sight. And since this is a school for teenage mothers and their babies in the poorest and most dangerous big city in America, well, it's impossible not to worry that the students' prospects may be as dim as the corridor.

But in the strange and strangely lovely city of Detroit, it's a mistake to make assumptions. The students of this school are lucky in their principal, a tall, drolly funny woman named Asenath Andrews, and college acceptance is a condition for graduation here. Head out the school's side door into a blaze of sunlight, and the most unlikely and inspiring sight appears: an urban farm that is almost breathtaking in its scope.

There are horses here grazing on what was once a running track. Endless beds of vegetables ring the oval perimeter. There's a full-fledged orchard. There are rabbits, there are chickens, and there's English teacher Andrew Kemp milking the goats. He and science teacher Paul Weertz grow almost all the feed for the farm on a vacant lot across town and get the students to help bale the hay.

Ask Asenath how such an ambitious agricultural venture emerged from a concrete schoolyard, and she rolls her eyes. "The rabbits turned into chickens and the chickens turned into goats. Then the goats turned into horses. We even had a steer for a while, until he knocked one of the kids over while she was pregnant. Then we sent him to a vocational school, where the students butchered him. Still educational," she says with a laugh.

Asenath, who grew up in a serious gardening family, with a grandfather who actually earned a living farming on Eight Mile Road at the Detroit city limits, has made gardens throughout her career. Early on she had the "crazy" idea that she could grow enough food for an entire school lunch program; now, older and wiser, she simply believes that agriculture is a powerful teaching tool. She points to a nifty solar-powered barn built by the students and grows rhapsodic: "The barn raising! I wish we could do a barn raising every semester. It's so empowering for girls to do construction."

Not only does the farm help her teenagers learn everything from carpentry to biology, it also teaches them to be better mothers, Asenath believes. "There are estimates that by age 3, poor kids have heard 30 million fewer words than kids in middle-class families." She pauses. "That 30-million-word deficit keeps me awake at night. We're trying to teach teenagers to *talk* to their babies. Well, there's a whole vocabulary attached to a garden that these teenagers can share."

With the burned-out shell of an abandoned house just visible in the distance beyond the farm, Asenath adds, "I may be getting too old for these visions, but we have so many kids in Detroit who can't get a job—they're bound for jail, or worse. They could be in charge of their own businesses, small individualistic farms. Adolescent boys especially like to be in charge. Why not encourage them to grow apples here?"

Asenath is not alone in this idea that you could cure a lot of ills simply by making Detroit's blighted landscape productive. Crops are springing up all over inner-city Detroit, and gardeners are joining forces here in a way that raises some interesting questions. Can ordinary people armed only with shovels do what glossy casinos and office towers haven't quite managed to do: turn a Rust Belt relic around? Can a city that industry has failed actually be saved by agriculture? Is Detroit hopelessly locked into its past as the center of American auto manufacturing—or is it redefining urban living for a greener future?

These questions can only be asked because Detroit has in some sense hit bottom. Since its peak of 1.85 million residents in 1950, half of Detroit's population has fled. Thanks to a lot of sorry history that includes the closing of auto plants in the city, racial tensions that culminated in the 12th Street riot in 1967, epidemic arson in the 1980s, and the current-day woes of the American auto industry and the subprime mortgage meltdown, demolishing abandoned houses has been one of the city's most important responsibilities for decades. Even today, there are architectural corpses in the swankiest mansion districts, and about a quarter of the land in this previously great city is now vacant. Some neighborhoods have almost vanished, leaving only a sprinkling of houses behind.

But there are advantages to hitting bottom, for cities as well as individuals. Inessentials are stripped away, and a certain clarity of purpose can result. Ashley Atkinson, the sweet-faced 30-year-old dynamo who has linked hundreds of Detroit's gardeners together in a group called the Garden Resource Program Collaborative, sums up the ferocious commitment of 21st-century Detroiters this way: "The people who are here want to be here. The people who've stayed aren't going anywhere."

Talk to Detroit's gardeners, at least, and the impression is one of overpowering love for their hometown. It's also possible to see how Detroit's swaths of urban prairie, if they were actively managed, could be turned into an attraction: They yield an oddly peaceful and natural urban experience. Just a few blocks from the towers of downtown, a pheasant darts across my path. Corine Smith, a lovely young photographer who moved from the Netherlands to marry a native Detroiter, talks about the charm of Detroit's airiness: "It's nice that there's space in this city. There's none at all in Amsterdam."

And if any city in the world has a culture that knows what to *do* with abandoned land, it's Detroit. Visit 82-year-old Lillie Neal, and you'll see that culture in action. "I just love vegetables. Give me some vegetables and corn bread," she says, leading me past a junk-filled backyard to a vegetable garden so big it makes even an experienced gardener like me quail. When I ask her who helps her manage this expanse, she replies, "My younger son sometimes, but he's away this year." Then, to my increasing astonishment, she leads me across the alley, where she has two more vegetable

beds almost as big Like a lot of Detroiters, Lillie came to the city from the South, where people gardened, and the right way, too. "My grandmother," Lillie tells me, "knew all about organic food. She showed me that greens raised on fertilizer don't taste right, while greens raised on cow manure are good."

Community garden leader Judy Gardner describes Detroit as a city shaped from its infancy by its backyard farmers. "It's always been spread out, a city of single-family homes, because it was largely built by Southern and Eastern European immigrants who wanted their gardens. Then you had all those rural Southerners coming here for jobs in the auto industry—including my dad, a hillbilly from Kentucky—bringing their gardening traditions with them."

As a result, the people I meet in their 50s and 60s remember the city of their childhoods as an urban Eden, where there were peaches overhead for the plucking, nut trees, vineyards, chickens—copious amounts of good food even when money was short. And thanks largely to Ashley Atkinson and her band of young idealists at the Garden Resource Program Collaborative, many of these people are now gardening again for the first time in decades and trying to pass on this old knowledge to Detroit's children.

Armed with limitless energy and a little money from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Ashley and her crew travel the city like modern-day Johnny Appleseeds, making sure nothing stands in the way of any Detroiters who want to wring some produce out of the ground. "D'ja want a bench?" Ashley says to the ladies who recently created a community garden at the Adams/Butzel Recreation Center. "I can get you a bench." A few minutes later, somebody expresses a desire for a sign. "I can get you a sign," Ashley pipes in cheerily.

For Ashley and her group, their work as agricultural evangelists is appealing precisely because they can do it in a city with a rich mix of people, including the many artists and immigrants drawn to Detroit by its cheap housing and lively neighborhoods like the charming Mexicantown. Patrick Crouch, a young farmer who runs a substantial organic farm that is part of the Capuchin Soup Kitchen, says that he has friends who moved to the country, only to dislike the isolation. "You don't have to move away to go back to the land, or leave the city to farm. Here I'm part of a community."

The fact is that farming in or near cities makes considerable sense in the world at large, as the political, environmental, and economic costs of trucking food thousands of miles head through the roof, and "eating local" seems increasingly like the responsible thing to do, as well as the food lover's choice. And it makes particular sense in Detroit, where there is so much unused land and very few supermarkets where decent produce can be bought. But Ashley points out, "I used to have the foolish idea that urban gardening was all about the food. Now I think that food is only a small part of it. Gardening here is about beautification, community building, friendship."

Hairstylist Nefertiti Harris says that her North Corktown community garden has helped knit the new development she lives in into the existing neighborhood. "At first, it was just about growing vegetables to feed our families. Now it's about getting to know the neighbors, exchanging things."

"Specific gardens are made for specific reasons," Ashley says as she drives me past a pocket garden that one block association created especially to drive out the prostitution taking place on a vacant lot.

Ultimately, gardening is a way of rewriting the meaning of Detroit's open land, from the end result of the worst urban pathologies to an expression of love on the part of individual Detroiters, from a stinging rejection by those with money and power to a stubborn insistence on Detroit's value by those without.

And because vacant lots can be had for a few hundred dollars—plus the patience to sort out the vagaries of private, city, county, and state ownership—it's possible for ordinary people to have a real effect on the landscape around them. Detroit city planner Kathryn Underwood has seen hundreds of lots acquired from the city and says that when it comes to developing this green space, "the government has to catch up with the community."

Since Ashley and her group have begun sponsoring farmers' markets around the city, it's possible that one of the meanings that may eventually be written onto Detroit's vacant land is the one Asenath Andrews envisions: entrepreneurship and opportunity for the young. Kathryn tells me, however, that making permanent features of community gardens and small-scale farming is not a popular idea with everyone in city government. "Many think that the best use of public land is to put a structure on it," she says. "But redevelopment isn't just physical, it's social and spiritual, too. Gardening brings people out of their houses and connects them. It's a joy to old people and opens a whole new world for the young.

"People have such a narrow definition of what urban should be," she continues. "We have a chance now to stretch that definition in Detroit, to make the city dense where it should be but also one of the greenest cities in America, a landscape of opportunity for creative living."

That is what cities, at their best, have always been—landscapes of opportunity for creative living. It's hard not to hope that Detroit will show the way forward for other rusting industrial cities across the country—and prove that with a lot of love, labor, and some very wonderful people, they could still be fruitful and beautiful places to live.

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Michele Owens, a freelance writer living in New York, blogs about gardening at GardenRant.com