

Extending a Hand

HELPING PEOPLE THROUGH GARDENING IS RON WOLFORD'S PASSION. FOR 25 YEARS, THE U. OF I. EXTENSION EDUCATOR HAS TOUCHED COUNTLESS LIVES WITH HIS WILLINGNESS TO PROVIDE LEADERSHIP AND TEACHING.

BY ROBIN HUIRAS PHOTOGRAPHY BY RON CAPEK

As a boy tending garden on his grandparents' rural Illinois farm, Ron Wolford never thought a career in horticulture would require him to pick through garbage in Chicago's poor and blighted North Lawndale neighborhood.

But an inner-city scavenger hunt is just where the small town boy turned urban educator found himself in the late 1980s. Contacted by community builders Gerald and Lorean Earles to help develop two vacant lots next to their home on South Trumbull and Ogden avenues, Wolford committed himself completely to establishing one of the West Side's first urban gardens as part of his work in the the University of Illinois Extension's Urban Gardening Program.

"Mr. Earles had an old beat-up van and we would drive it around the neighborhood looking for construction sites where we could salvage old fences," says Wolford, who's been with UI Extension for 25 years. "We had chain link, wooden fence and other varieties, but it was enough to enclose those two blocks. We would shovel soil from construction sites right into the back of the van and by the end of the summer we had 24 raised garden beds."

Wolford's days of digging through construction debris have long since passed. Not only is he now able to procure construction materials through his program's various partners, but his responsibilities managing several dozen programs leave him little time for goose chases.

Indeed, his zeal for gardening manifests itself in so many endeavors (the most recent of which is blogging about Extension highlights), Wolford has little time for personal gardening projects.



Ron Wolford pauses from his busy, busy life to stop and smell the geraniums in the greenhouse of the Chicago High School for the Agricultural Sciences.

the gardener

"Nobody in my neighborhood knows what I do," says Wolford of his Lansing home, which is crowded with shade-giving silver maples. "I can't grow anything there. I've got about 30-40 containers and have a few impatiens, begonias and hostas, but the lawn is mainly clover, violets and other greenery."

To those he helps, however, Wolford's thumb could be no greener.

"He's really dedicated to the work he does. I think he sleeps and dreams his work, always thinking about gardening and the things he'd like to see done," says Gerald Earles. "He's involved in getting people together and fixing things up. If it wasn't for him, I don't think we'd have what we have now."

Wolford's recent handiwork was on display at the Museum of Science and Industry this past year, where a 700-square foot sustainable vegetable garden enhanced the Smart House exhibit. Three days a week Wolford worked at the exhibit maintaining its plants, giving tours or answering questions. It was the sustainability of the project that made it so appealing and one of the reasons he held tight to it despite threats the state legislature would cut Extension's funding for 2009.

"This was not the first time that's happened, and somehow it all worked out," Wolford says. "But there was concern because without the appropriation, Extension would've been wiped out. When the news came... I basically had to drop everything and focus on the Master Gardener Program and the sustainable garden."

Sustainability is a prevailing principle in Wolford's gardening philosophy and one he instills in each of the pupils he helps train through Extension's Master Gardener Program. Although it now includes more than 200 devoted gardeners in Cook and the collar counties, it had an active roster of only 30 when Wolford took over the program 20 years ago. "They're a vocal, active and educated group of volunteers," Wolford says of the men and women who spend time in their communities passing along >>

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"I love my job. Extension is unique.

There's so much flexibility to set my own goals and then just to go out and do it—there's so much possibility."

—Ron Wolford



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It's the diversity of those volunteers, indeed, the diversity of everyone he encounters in his work, that powers his passion, he says. His penchant for people is born out in the proud faces of those pictured in photos covering his office walls at the Chicago School for Agricultural Sciences. For nine years the school has been his home base and he not only sits on its council but also provides faculty with technical assistance developing curriculum and maintaining the school's extensive gardens.

One of those pictures displays a garden that holds a special place in Wolford's heart—a sprawling 10,000-square-foot plot managed by a group of master gardeners who volunteer at the Cook County Jail complex. More than 15 years ago, Extension and the Cook County Sheriff's Department of Community Supervision and Intervention (DCSI), entered into a partnership to create a garden at the jail and offer master gardener certificates to inmates.

"At first, everyone thought it was a joke," Wolford says. "But that garden has more than 150 tomato plants and so much other produce that it puts on a harvest festival for which some of the former inmates return, and it gives away all of its food. I love that program because we started it from scratch."

Although some were skeptical, Wolford knew the project had tremendous potential. "Once he was in, he was in for good," says Dave Devane, executive director of DCSI.

"He was very receptive from the beginning. I remember in years past, he would bring his kids out there and was willing to do whatever it took to make the program go." Wolford's ability to transcend social, racial and political strata to establish productive relationships with everyone involved in the program was impressive, Devane says.

It's a sentiment shared by Brother Dennis Murphy, who got to know Wolford in the mid-1990s when he was seeking funds to develop a garden next to Su Casa, a home for displaced Hispanic families located on the 5000 block of South Laflin Avenue. "He's willing to help people in their backyards or neighborhood groups. He's helped a number of neighborhoods, particularly on the South Side, where people tend to be poor," Murphy says. "It's miraculous the amount of help he gives to people, and it extends over racial and religious lines."

Whether helping Chicago's less fortunate establish a community garden or teaching high school students about the benefits of bugs, Wolford's unfailing interest in his work is perhaps an extension of the hopefulness rooted in the rural Illinois soil of his grandparents' farm that he cultivated as a child.

"I love my job. Extension is unique. There's so much flexibility to set my own goals and then just to go out and do it—there's so much possibility," Wolford says. "When I was little, I grew a rosebush—and I still think it's a miracle you can plant a seed and it will grow into a flower." 🌱