

An Early History of Project Grow

By Nelson Meade

This year, 2002, Project Grow will be thirty years old as a non-profit corporation. An initial community garden located on Stone School Road near Ellsworth had been organized in 1971. Its success emboldened Susan Drake, its initiator, to organize Grow, as she called it, on a city-wide basis in 1972.

My involvement with Project Grow dates from its inception. In April 1971, I had just been elected to City Council from the Third Ward. Shortly after taking office I received a call from Susan Drake, a constituent, who lived on Brooklyn in the Burns Park neighborhood, announcing that she and some of her neighbors wanted to start a “victory garden”. They wanted to locate the garden on public land. Would I help them locate a suitable site?

I knew what a “victory garden” was. My family had a victory garden during World War II. My father even got extra gas rationing stamps to enable us to drive to my grandfather’s farm where it was located. But I suspect that Susan used the term because The Victory Garden was a popular gardening program on PBS focusing on community gardens in the US and Europe.

I arranged for Susan and me to meet with George Owens, the Ann Arbor superintendent of Parks and Recreation. George steered us away from the idea that we might locate the garden in one of the existing parks. He suggested that we should study the zoning map and investigate sites labeled PL (public land). Susan turned up one such site on Stone School Road near Ellsworth that was vacant. But, an investigation revealed it was no longer public land. It had been owned by the University of Michigan, but had it been sold to Carl Brauer, a real estate man and developer. It was now zoned light industrial. Mr. Brauer was receptive to its use as a community garden site until it could be sold for development. As it turned out it remained a garden site for seven years. A nearby farmer, Mr. McCalla, whose farm was on Stone School Road just south of Ellsworth, was using part of Mr. Brauer’s land, and he agreed to plow a portion of the site for the garden.

The garden site was about one acre in size. There was an adjacent creek from which water could be drawn. Susan decided it was more land than her Burns Park neighbors needed. Further east on Ellsworth Road a new subsidized low income housing project was being completed. It was named Arbor Park, and it is now known as University Townhouses. Susan decided to leaflet the cooperative and to invite the residents there to join in the gardening project. Many families responded to the invitation. Altogether in 1971, 43 families gardened together at the Stone School site, about half from Burns Park and half from Arbor Park. The gardeners had a successful year.

The success of the first year’s garden convinced Susan Drake that community gardening should be available city wide. And it was to be more than simply gardening. The joining together in a single effort of affluent Burns Park residents and the low income and more diverse residents of Arbor Park was a model that should be replicated.

Susan Drake was inspired. In 1972 she became a missionary for community gardening, promoting her vision by speaking to City Council, the Ann Arbor School Board, the Recreation Advisory Committee, the Washtenaw County Board of Commissioners, the Ecology Center, the Chamber of Commerce and others.

She began to line up other garden sites on public, private and church properties. The Ecology Center was developing an organic garden as a demonstration project on North Campus where the Gerald Ford Presidential library is now located, and an Ecology Center staff member was assigned to work with Susan in organizing these garden sites. New sites included Arrowwood Hills on Pontiac Trail, County Farm, Freeman School in Dixboro, Peace Neighborhood Center, Zion Lutheran Church and Hikone Public Housing. To Susan, Project Grow was a grand social experiment bringing people from all social strata together in a common activity.

Susan assembled a steering committee to help with organizing and managing the gardens. One of her recruits was Bruce McPherson, the Superintendent of Schools. McPherson arranged for Project Grow to become a Class B affiliate of the Ann Arbor Recreation Department. The recreation staff was able to provide assistance in various ways. Bobbie Lawrence of the County's Cooperative Extension Service provided horticultural advice and assistance. It soon became clear that Project Grow would need to incorporate as a non-profit corporation so that it could apply for financial assistance from government agencies and other groups. Bob Guenzel, then an Assistant City Attorney, did the legal work pro-bono and agreed to serve on the Board of Directors. (Guenzel, of course, is now Washtenaw County's Administrator.

When 1973 opened Susan was no longer able to devote virtually full time to leading Project Grow. Instead a young graduate of The School of Natural Resources was hired on a half time basis to manage the community garden project. Unfortunately he had to leave town before the summer had passed to take a full time professional position. Financial aid came in the form of grants from both the County Board Commissioners (Project Grow became a regular line item in the Extension Service budget) and from City Council out of a new source, federal revenues sharing funds. Beginning in 1973 gardeners were asked to make a donation to help cover costs at \$10 per plot. These donations provided nearly \$2000. Salaries were provided for the part time director and for site coordinators. The budget grew to nearly \$6800.

In 1974 the regional office of the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation (BOR), located here in Ann Arbor, decided to sponsor a regional conference on community gardening. BOR was a bureau of the Department of Interior which administered the federal Land and Water Conservation program and it was generally responsible for promoting outdoor recreation. (In 1981, the BOR was abolished by the order of President Reagan). I was contacted by BOR staff regarding the conference, and I recommended that Susan Drake be included as one of the speakers. Susan spoke about her experience with Project Grow, and John Cherry, the Regional BOR director, hired her to promote Community gardening in the seven state region. In the course of this employment Susan produced a handbook to guide community garden organizers.

During the rest of the 70s community gardening continued to be quite popular. The difficulty was the annual turnover of staff. There was no continuity and little institutional memory. Each year the project had to be virtually re-invented. Each year, too, we had to persuade the city council to renew the grant for another year, and it was chancy because the city budget was not finally adopted until the last week of May, well into the growing season, and usually after a commitment had already been made to new staff. In 1976, the director position was funded by the CETA program (the federal Comprehensive Employment and Training Act) through the auspices of the new County Parks and Recreation Commission. Office space was provided at Park headquarters. This had its drawbacks because the new director did not regard himself as answerable to the Project Grow board of directors and he sometimes took initiatives without board approval or support. CETA funding lasted for only one year.

The real turning point in providing stability and permanence to Project Grow came in the late 70's. John A. Seeley had become president of the board of directors. John is a principal in Formative Evaluation Research Associates which provides consultation on organizational issues to colleges and universities. John persuaded the board that the only way that Project Grow would be able to survive and prosper is if it made a commitment to a year round director, hopefully full time but at least $\frac{3}{4}$ time. They drew up a formal job description, posted the position and attracted several good candidates. Ken Nicholls, the successful candidate, had a masters degree in urban planning with real leadership qualities, and he was a marvelous gardener as well. At about this same time when Lou Belcher was Mayor of Ann Arbor, city council decided that community gardening should be a permanent feature of Ann Arbor life and that Project Grow should be a regular line item in the city budget, reasoning that it was less expensive to support a non-profit than to fund a program run by regular city staff. Project Grow also was assigned a "permanent" home in the old ward building at 926 Mary Street used by the city as a polling place on election day but otherwise unoccupied. Ken Nichols improved the space by installing a side window and planting flower beds around the exterior. On Election Day he simply moved all the Project Grow files and furniture to the rear of the building and the election went on. In the early-80's, of course, Project Grow was invited to become a resident organization at the Leslie Science Center and to contribute to the center's programs by providing demonstration and children's gardens. Ken Nicholls left Project Grow in 1983 to accept the position of Executive Director of the Wilmington Garden Center in Wilmington, Delaware.

This brief history has been focused almost exclusively on a few of the organizational problems that Project Grow faced. Whole areas of the history of Project Grow have been left out. Some garden sites have been more or less permanent while other have come and gone. The emphasis on organic gardening was not stressed initially. I wanted to call attention to the 30 Anniversary of Project Grow, of course, but I am also concerned that with the potential threat to Project Grow's allocation of funds in the city budget due to the tight fiscal situation the city faces. We may be entering another period of instability. At least, it will take creative leadership to get through this crisis. The increase in gardening fees this year is a beginning... Caveat: This account of PG history is based largely on my memory of events. I have a paucity of documentation. But I believe the account is in general if not in the specifics, accurate.