

Growing the Garden and the Gardeners

by Cecilia Nasti



"You can bury a lot of troubles digging in the dirt."

—Anonymous

Deloria Grant, seventy-three, lives on the same street and in the same house she's lived in since she was a girl. It is the house her father Boston Grant, an educator, coach and guidance counselor, built for his family on East Thirteenth Street. It is the house where her grandmother Lizzy, a teacher and domestic who lived in San Marcos, came each weekend to care for her young granddaughter and son following the untimely death of her daughter-in-law. It is the house where more than sixty years ago Deloria Grant learned how to grow a backyard vegetable garden.

For years, three generations of this small, close-knit family worked side-by-side to cultivate a large food plot in the backyard of their East Austin home, something they—and their neighbors—did out of necessity back then.

"The neighborhood was different when I was growing up," Grant said in a telephone conversation. "Most all the people had gardens, and everyone shared what they had. Flowers or vegetables, if you didn't have something in your garden and someone else did,

they shared. And everyone knew everyone in the neighborhood because most people *had* gardens, and everyone sat on their front porches to visit. If you were sick, they came to see about you."

Over time, and after the passing of the elder Grants, the garden on East Thirteenth Street slowly returned to nature, but Grant (a former nurse who developed breathing problems that made it difficult for her to spend time outdoors) never forgot the joy she felt when her hands were in the deep, rich soil; or the sense of community she experienced that grew from a neighborhood teeming with gardens and gardeners; or the satisfaction she derived from sharing meals overflowing with homegrown vegetables, lovingly prepared by Grandma Lizzy.

Today, with the help of the **Green Corn Project** (www.greencornproject.org) Deloria Grant once again has a vegetable garden that provides her with fresh, healthful organic produce. It is a garden that also allows her to reconnect with an intimate and precious time

from her past. Grant said, "They gave me back something I thought I had lost forever."

Since 1998, the Green Corn Project, a 501(c)3 nonprofit, has installed more than one hundred and thirty organic food gardens in Austin's underserved neighborhoods, touching the lives of hundreds of people. With only one paid employee, **Executive Director Meagan O'Donnell**, who works half-time, **Green Corn Project Board President Mitch Mills** says the organization achieves its mission—to educate and assist Central Texans in growing organic food gardens—through the hard work and dedication of an ever-expanding group of community volunteers, many of whom join with little or no gardening experience.

"I think the biggest misapprehension people have is that you have to be a master gardener (to volunteer); that's definitely not the case. I had only done container gardening before I became

a volunteer, and later a team leader. Green Corn provides a lot of training in that aspect, and we have a fairly detailed method that we follow."

Green Corn provides hands-on workshops to volunteers, employing biointensive gardening methods outlined in John Jeavons' book, *How to Grow More Vegetables (and fruits, nuts, berries, grains, and other crops) Than You Ever Thought Possible on Less Land Than You Can Imagine*. Workshop leaders take volunteers through double-digging garden beds to "grow" soil, composting, intensive and companion planting, seed saving and starting, and garden planning.

Green Corn Project volunteers use their newfound skills during twice yearly Dig-ins where they build and plant ten-by-four-foot organic vegetable gardens at qualifying homes, schools and community centers. "To



qualify for a garden,” says **Wayne Kamin**, Green Corn garden coordinator chair, “you have to fill out an application form that verifies you have a low income, fixed income, are elderly on modest income or disabled.” Kamin adds, “This is not charity, it is a helping hand. Our goal is to help our gardeners achieve self-sufficiency.”

“After I was diagnosed with cancer,” says **Jude Filler**, longtime Austin social justice advocate, “I wanted to start eating as healthfully as possible, and to me, that meant organic produce. Because I’m on disability, I can’t afford what grocery stores charge. So, I went to **Boggy Creek Farm**, and asked **Carol Ann Sayle** (farm co-owner with husband **Larry Butler**), if I could trade my labor for their produce. She kindly declined, telling me, ‘Everyone asks me if they can do that,’ and then told me about the Green Corn Project.”

Filler called Green Corn, completed the application, and the next time they had a Dig-in, she got her garden. “This garden is a gift for me,” she says. “It’s true I get vegetables, but I also get so much joy and community. Everybody (that receives a garden) who can, volunteers in some way. I cannot put in gardens physically, but I can find people who need gardens.” One of those people was her neighbor of twenty years, Deloria Grant.

“I think that a garden is a great place over which and through which to put racial and cultural and political barriers aside,” says Green Corn’s Kamin. “It’s where we can reach across, in mutual respect and understanding, to grow and share good food.”

This fall, Green Corn will create additional opportunities for sharing and community building by installing new organic food gardens, as well as refurbishing current gardens, like those found in the backyards of neighbors Deloria Grant and Jude Filler. None of this work could take place, however, were it not for the generosity of individuals and area businesses providing cash and in-kind donations.

“Most of the money we take in annually comes from our fall festival,” says Green Corn’s Mills. “We’re grateful to the chefs, restaurants and businesses that donate their time and products to help us raise money for our work, in a food- and fun-filled afternoon.” The annual **Cook Globally**,

Grow Locally fund-raiser is Sunday October 26, 2008, from noon to four, at Boggy Creek Farm (www.boggycreekfarm.com) on Lyons Road in East Austin. (There’s a map on the web site.) Tickets are thirty-five dollars in advance and forty dollars the day of the event, and can be purchased on-line at www.greencornproject.org. Children under twelve get in free.

On a recent trip to Boggy Creek Farm, Carol Ann Sayle explained why they host the event. “We’re into gardens, too, and we like to do nice things for the community when we can. We’ve hosted nine of them (Green Corn fund-raisers), and this year is the tenth anniversary fund-raiser.” In fact, Sayle, along with **Green Corn Founder Dana Conner** and **Foo Swasdee**, executive chef-owner of Satay restaurant, sprouted the original idea for the fundraiser ten years ago while sitting next to each other at an organic gardening meeting in Austin—another instance of gardening bringing people together.

Wayne Kamin says this year’s festival is dedicated to the memory of **Denise Salles Kirschenlor**, a longtime Green Corn family member who recently passed away. “She was and still is the heart and soul of the fundraiser,” says Kamin. “She always had everybody’s back. Her word was always good. She was and is a complete joy.”

“There’s nothing about this organization’s mission that isn’t about joy,” Jude Filler said. “Tilling the soil, planting a garden, watching things grow, and sharing the experience. It’s a delight.”

Deloria Grant agrees. “I can’t really work in my garden myself anymore, but I still love the smell of the soil, and watching things grow. It’s my therapy, and Green Corn helps me. And then my neighbor Jude will sometimes pick vegetables from my garden and her garden and cook something up—because I’m not much for cooking—and then bring me some of what she made. It reminds me of old times.” ☺

Want more of Cecilia Nasti’s gardening know-how, wit and wisdom? Tune-in at 11:55am every Saturday during “Folkways” for her “Growing Concerns” segments aired exclusively on KUT-FM 90.5, public radio for Austin. Or log onto www.kut.org. You may e-mail Cecilia at cnasti@goodlifemag.com.