

East Dallas community garden cultivates relationships

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By **THOMAS KOROSEC** / Special Contributor to **The Dallas Morning News**

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Pessimists need not apply at Elizabeth Dry's Promise of Peace Community Garden.

Even after a brutally hot summer where tomatoes quit early, cucumbers never worked and squash bugs were working too well, she can name little in the [East Dallas](#) garden plot that doesn't register on the sunny side of life. Now that fall has brought a flush of new green growth, her abiding optimism may have been the right note all along.

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Photos by JUAN GUAJARDO/Special Contributor

"It seems to generate whatever we need," said Dry, who began the garden early this year with a \$10,000 grant from the city of Dallas' Loving My Community neighborhood improvement program. Generous sponsors and helpful people have arrived in timely and difficult-to-predict ways ever since, she says.

One weekend last spring, "we were doing a Native American garden called the Three Sisters." It's a complementary arrangement in which corn provides support for climbing beans while earthbound squash cools the other plants' roots and helps to prevent weeds that rob nutrients. "It teaches the kids how diversity supports, how differences complement one another," she said.

In accordance with Iroquois legend, a fish was to be buried in the soil to add fertilizer.

"So we're standing in the garden thinking where we can find a sushi place for the fish and, I kid you not, up drove a sushi chef. What are the chances?" said Dry, 55. "He had come to give us some tomato cages, and he ended up bringing us three fish. This has happened over and over again."

The garden is on East Grand Avenue, just up the street from the White Rock Lake spillway, near where Grand merges with Garland Road. Its hand-drawn sign and storybook cottages painted mustard yellow, barn red and dusty green make it clear this is a far different kind of place than the liquor stores, tavern and pawnshop that have long dominated these few blocks.

In Dry's high school days, she recalls, the lot had been the location of Doug's Drive-In. A shade tree near the back of the property seemed welcoming when she first considered the site. Owner Jack Keller, of the drive-in burger stands, agreed to lease the concrete pad and bits of surrounding soil for a sum that puts her monthly overhead at just under \$1,000, including the bill for city water.

In just eight months, supporters have come up with an estimated \$100,000 worth of materials and labor, which have gone a long way to transform the space from a mud lot to the greensward it is today. At the front of the plot, behind two sculptures of giant sunflowers, sit two cottages that had been playhouses at the nearby Dallas Arboretum. Their roofs are rigged to a set of hand-painted rain barrels, and inside are panels of the story *City Green*, a children's book by DyAnne DiSalvo-Ryan about city kids who turn a vacant lot into a garden.

"We had to have that," said Dry, who teaches third grade at Alex Sanger Elementary.

In rows down one side of the lot are 20 beds purchased with the original city grant and 20 raised beds, soil and vegetable transplants donated by Burpee in its first year of a new program, the "I Can Grow" youth garden award. Some beds overflow with bountiful melon, pepper and okra plants; others host tinder-dry tomato vines that struggled to survive this summer's 100-degree weeks.

Behind the beds are the community garden's newest acquisitions, a greenhouse and toolshed donated by Shared FUEL, a group of ecologically conscious Dallas women who picked Dry's project as the recipient of one of its first grants.

Neighborhood residents rent the plots for \$75 a year to plant and tend any crop they choose.

The Promise of Peace garden joins at least a dozen other community gardens in and around Dallas. The movement began here more than 20 years ago when the East Dallas Community Garden, which benefits Southeast Asian immigrants, broke ground. What sets this garden apart is Dry's goal of growing more than vegetables. She envisions it as a tool to help build understanding among neighbors – children and adults of different races and economic backgrounds – through shared experiences, conversation, classes and performances on a newly installed stage.

People from 12 distinct neighborhoods were working in the garden this summer, she says, and she has provided plots for several area elementary schools to use in science classes.

"In our brochure we quote Louisa, a student at Woodrow Wilson High School, who talks about getting to know students unlike her. Once she knew them, she loved them and they loved her back. It's about simple solutions," Dry said.

On a recent Saturday morning, more than a dozen gardeners were at work in this idealistic landscape. They included Dry's first plot lessee, a woman who chose to live near the garden, and a pair of young siblings who have high hopes that fall gardening will prove easier than coaxing produce through the blaze of summer.

Claudette Head met Dry at a networking event last winter, heard her describe her new project and that evening wrote a check to rent a plot. "I'd always had flowers, but I never had a vegetable garden before," said Head, 58, a Junius Heights resident.

Head said she's had more luck getting to know her fellow gardeners than she's had with her plants, which she tends three or four mornings a week. Some okra survived, and she coaxed a few tomatoes from her vines. "Everything else sort of burned up," she said, attributing the trouble to the full-sun plot she chose. "I'm upgrading to one of those near the back that gets a little shade," she said.

Marla Brandt, a 49-year-old [real estate](#) consultant also from Junius Heights, was introduced to the garden through her friend Kathleen Benanti, 42, a sports therapist from [Hollywood](#) Heights, another nearby neighborhood. Brandt, who was spending her first week at the garden, talked of heading into the fall with plantings of leeks and kale, both cool-season crops.

Meanwhile, Benanti's confident description of her fall choices was easily matched by the vigor of the spring-planted produce arrayed in her plot. "That's Swiss chard, cantaloupe, jalapeños and Anaheims, tomatoes. I have three different kinds of string beans. These in the front grow red, and when you boil them they go green. Those are carrots that you can barely see coming up, and radishes. I'll have kale and lettuce when it gets cooler."

The abundance of Benanti's plot notwithstanding, garden newcomer

Suzanne Hagood said community gardens are not about raising enough food to feed yourself. "You're planting the idea of sustainability," said Hagood, 52, who ran a community garden in York, Ala. She recently moved back to Dallas and rented an apartment next door to the garden.

"Elizabeth is working with kids, and for them it's hands-on. So many things we do now are technology. They're not tangible. But here they're producing something," she said.

Apparently not producing enough, though, to suit 9-year-old Karla Ramirez. With her 16-year-old brother, Luis Ramirez, a junior at Woodrow, Karla has been tending a family plot. "We had cucumbers. Two were good but the rest got rotten, and we pulled them up," said Karla, a fifth-grader at Eduardo Mata Elementary. They're starting over with a fall planting.

"That is the beauty of the garden," Dry said. "You can start again."

Thomas Korosec is a Dallas freelance writer.

Promise of Peace Community Garden

7446 E. Grand Ave., Dallas

www.promiseofpeace.us

East Dallas children 8 to 12 may participate in the Junior Master Gardeners program on Saturday mornings. Free.