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Dream garden winner honors neighbor who inspired her to grow

By Susan Reimer, The Baltimore Sun

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"Mr. Leroy," as he was known, was Eleanor Justice's neighbor and her gardening inspiration.

He chiseled a patch of dirt out of the concrete parking pad behind his house in Reservoir Hill and planted vegetables there, sharing his harvest with the neighborhood.

When he died, his garden patch seemed to reflect the loss — it was barren and untended. But Justice thought that if Mr. Leroy could grow his own food in the concrete world of the city, she could, too.

"I live just a couple of skinny Baltimore rowhouses down from Mr. Leroy's garden," she wrote in the essay that was her entry for a chance to win a "dream garden" from Burpee Seed Co.

"As I stand at my window, looking from his garden onto the cement below my window, I'm inspired. I could grow our groceries in that little patch of sun, and I dream of raised beds brimming with herbs and vegetables, and of sharing the bounty with our neighbors. I could turn that wasted space into something productive, and raise our quality of life more than I know how to articulate."

Justice's essay was the award winner, and Burpee arrived Tuesday to install container gardens on the concrete pad behind the home she rents.

The "dream garden" essay contest, which was run only in Baltimore last summer, drew about 80 responses, the company said.

"This little patch of cement is about to be turned into a little garden oasis," Justice said Tuesday morning as she waited for the containers, soil and plants to arrive.

"I offered to jackhammer the cement out of here, but they said it would be fine," she said.

While Jessica Atchison and Brenda Connolly of Burpee filled the cedar planters with potting soil, lobster compost and about 30 vegetable seedlings, Justice showed visitors the community garden across the alley from her new garden.

She had written in her essay about Mr. Leroy's passing and the mysterious resurgence of the community garden that followed. After years of languishing, the garden is returning to life.

"While Mr. Leroy was alive, the community garden was largely abandoned; vandalism and disuse had taken its toll," she wrote in her essay. "Maybe it's Mr. Leroy's spirit looking over it that's helped to make such a big difference, but for the first time in god knows how long, every plot is taken and many people have been turned away."

In the cedar planter along Justice's fence, Burpee planted herbs, beans, tomatoes, peppers, squash and cucumbers. There will be watermelons, too. Justice, a freelance graphic designer, hopes to paint the parking pad in lively colors and dot it with more brightly colored pots containing herbs and flowers.

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She knows the risks of urban gardening. An heirloom tomato plant she was growing last summer disappeared —along with its enormous and very heavy planter.

"I grew it from seed," she said. "I try to be positive and think that maybe if they took that much trouble to take the whole planter, they took the trouble to take care of the tomato plant and maybe its seeds are growing this year."

Burpee also gave Justice a \$100 gift card to Home Depot, about a dozen packets of flower seeds and an extra bunch of plants to plant in the community garden across the alley.

"I specifically asked for cherry tomatoes," she said. "That way the kids can eat them when they pass by. Just like candy."

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