

# In the Garden

by Carol Barany

In 1995, in my hometown of Buffalo, New York, two residents launched an event that would go further toward beautifying neighborhoods and promoting community pride than they ever imagined. They began with a simple truth: you almost can't find a better way to relate to people than through their gardens.



Already members of a block club in their West Side neighborhood, Marvin Lunenfeld and Gail McCarthy did some door-to-door networking and created the basic framework for the first Buffalo Garden Walk. Twenty-nine gardens, all within walking distance, were opened for 2 days on the last weekend in July for self-guided tours. There were 100 visitors that first year.

The founders were clear that Garden Walk was all about community, and not about competition. "We don't see it as an elite ideal. There are no prizes for best garden. All you have to do is be proud of your little spot on Earth."

The number of gardens on the Walk grew, and by 2000, there were over 100. It didn't take long for gardeners outside the city to want to get involved, and the National Buffalo Garden Festival was created to organize it all. The extravaganza now runs for five weeks and includes an array of garden tours, talks, workshops, and seminars. Last year, an estimated 100,000 people toured over 400 gardens in the city and more than 1,000 in the Buffalo-Niagara region, come rain or shine. I was able to tour this year for a single day. It was magnificent.

Keep in mind that what has become the largest garden tour in the United States took root in a city that got 95.3 inches of snow last year, and where the first reliably frost-free date is Memorial Day weekend.

If you go to see rare collectible plants, you'll be disappointed. Think eclectic and funky. The vast majority of featured gardens were created with little professional help on shoe-string budgets with repurposed materials (old bowling balls have been elevated to a garden art form) and very ordinary plants. What you will see is the fruits of boundless gusto and enthusiasm, never in short supply in Buffalo.

Most of the participating gardens are private, but from the beginning, an increasing number of community food plots, corporate gardens, and church gardens have been featured.

Along the way, Garden Walk Buffalo has won regional and international garden tourism awards, rejuvenated streets, re-energized neighborhoods, and increased property values. Local nurseries are thriving. It's estimated that Garden Walk makes a \$4.5 million annual impact the local economy.

Even more remarkable is that the tickets have always been free. The work of managing and organizing the event is accomplished exclusively by volunteers. T-shirt sales, donations, and corporate sponsorships have helped to pay infrastructure costs.

We're proud of Yakima's amazing gardens and welcoming neighborhoods. What are we waiting for? Let's get garden walking. Maybe you have some new neighbors you wish you knew better, or some old ones you've been neglecting. Do some doorbelling and arrange an afternoon or evening of garden exploration in your own beautiful neighborhood.

Keep it as low-key and stress-free as possible. It's not about the plants as much as it is about fellowship and building connections for stronger neighborhoods and a more beautiful city. Remember, if someone is yard-less but really proud of a single topsy-turvy tomato they're growing on their patio, sign them up.

Who knows how far this idea may go? The originators of the first Buffalo Garden Walk were not thinking that far ahead. Let's take it one year at a time.

On Sunday, September 11 from noon until 4:00 pm, several gardens in the Barge-Chestnut Neighborhood will be open for visits. This is the event's third year, and of course it's free. A list of gardens will be posted on the Barge-Chestnut Neighborhood Association website at [www.bcnayakima.com](http://www.bcnayakima.com) and on their Facebook page after September 4. Feel free to visit every garden on the list, or just a few, in any order that you choose. Golf carts and bicycles are welcome.

Do you live in the Barge-Chestnut Neighborhood and have a garden to share on September 11? It's not too late to get on the list. All you have to do is be proud of your little spot on Earth. Call me at 509-901-9018 for full instructions.