

Armstrong Gardens, Illinois

American member, Deborah McMillin, describes a visit to the Holmstad Retirement Centre where a garden has been designed with spiritual wellbeing in mind

A trip to Illinois to visit my family and friends in the scenic Fox Valley River area provided me with the opportunity to visit the Armstrong Gardens at The Holmstad, a retirement centre set on 38 parkland acres in Batavia where my sister Marcy was employed. The Holmstad is associated with the Evangelical Covenant Church which has had a tradition since its founding in Chicago in 1886 by Swedish immigrants, to provide social services to communities and their residents. Today the Covenant Retirement Community provides continuing care needs for senior citizens from independent living to long term care services.

My first visit to the garden was brief. Marcy introduced me to Clarice Schultz and her gardening partner Jamie Weaver and indicated that we had common garden interests. I told Clarice that gardening was my 'bliss time'. She understood that. A subsequent visit with Clarice at her Holmstad cottage gave me insight into how she used gardening as part of her ministry as a Unity Prayer Chaplain. This community garden transcends just growing fresh vegetables and ornamental plants.

The Holmstad opened its doors for independent living for senior citizens in 1975. Many of these first residents had been farmers in the fertile farmland of the area. They wanted to continue with gardening so requested the administration to provide space for a community vegetable garden.

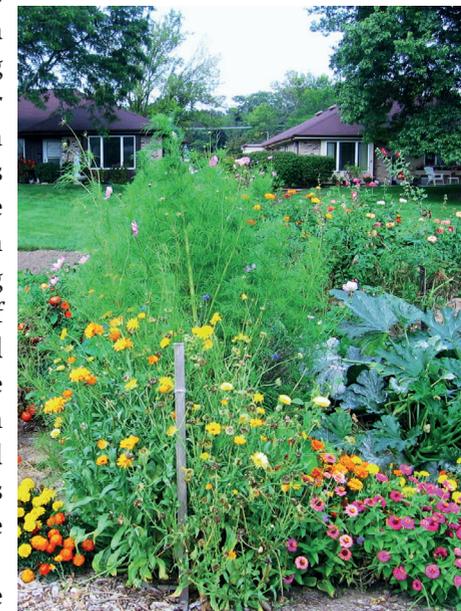


Deborah McMillin

Two large areas were provided with plots that could be subdivided depending on individual gardeners' needs. Eventually the population changed with the majority of the incoming senior citizens preferring ornamental gardening since they had been familiar with that from suburban living. The community vegetable garden has continued though, to provide fresh produce to the Holmstad residents and to the Batavia community for people in need.

On a spring day at dawn, before the morning commuter traffic, Bob Dahlstrom, a Batavia resident, drives his vintage tractor to Holmstad traversing the Batavia Fabian Parkway Bridge spanning the Fox River. Since a rotor-tiller is not conducive to gardeners with artificial knees or hips, he provides the heavy equipment to till the vegetable garden in the spring. In the fall, with the end of the growing season, he plows up the remains of the garden and spreads collected compost over the beds. Over time good soil has been established in all the garden beds with ground mulch, grass clippings, wood chips and compost incorporated into the earth.

The Holmstad gardeners can be anxious for spring warmth after months of Illinois winter. Eager to garden with the first days of



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Above a member of the Garden Club tends the vegetable plot. Bottom: the vegetable plot in spring.

sunshine and melted snow, they often plant vegetable seeds prematurely. New seeds are planted if there is a late winter setback. By June the borders of the vegetable beds are full of bright colors with popular annuals such as marigolds, zinnia, petunia and cosmos.

By mid-summer carrots and onions are pulled out of the warm soil. Vines of summer squash, fall pumpkins and ornamental gourds compete for space with purple beets, peppers, asparagus, cabbage, lettuce and rhubarb. Ripe red tomatoes spill out of tall wire cages. Golden towering sunflowers are interspersed throughout the beds, their seeds nourishment for birds. Thorny raspberry bushes are at the far edge of the garden. With an overabundance of vegetables a Garden Market is set up each Tuesday during the harvest season to share the fresh excess produce with Holmstad residents. Corn on the cob (Illinois soil grows the best), green peppers, cucumbers, beets, kale, broccoli, varieties of summer squash, yellow and green zucchini, and red tomatoes ripe for instant consumption, are popular offerings from the garden. Additional baskets of produce are donated to the Batavia Food Pantry. For floral bouquets cut flowers of phlox, gladiolus, sunflower, zinnia and daisies from the garden, are included in the weekly market for purchase.

The Holmstad Garden Club uses the money from the market sales for buying garden supplies and maintaining the community garden shed. Clarice has been able to obtain plants for the garden through donations from people at her church and other gardeners that may be

Right: the Garden Market which sells produce grown in the gardens



Archive pictures

downsizing or having to retire from gardening. Holmstad vegetable growers share the garden space when additional plots are available with other gardeners in the Fox Valley area. This provides a welcome addition of younger people working in the garden.

A garden isn't static. Like the person (or persons) who attend to the care of a garden, it matures and evolves, shaped by the personality and the life experiences of the creator. Under Clarice's guidance the Garden Club members have designed an ornamental garden that provides a place for individuals to find peace and recharge spiritually.

When I met Clarice she had been living at The Holmstad for 14 years and an active participant in the Garden Club for that time. Gardening was imprinted on her while growing up on a dairy farm in northern Wisconsin. Her farm chores started at an early age. Acres of vegetables were planted alternating with rows of dahlias. Green beans, peas and strawberries were sold as money crops to canning factories. For the family tomatoes and apple butter were canned and meat was provided by hunting and the farm cows and pigs.

As an adult living in Plainfield, Illinois, Clarice continued to garden in a down-sized suburban style with flowers, bushes, trees and a few vegetables, creating a nice spot for her children as they were growing up. After her children left home she found satisfaction and recognition in her work with gardens that would benefit other people. Clarice's life changed radically in August of 1990 when she lost her home and nearly her life when a

Left: the flower garden and gazebo



Marcy Burtch



deadly tornado ripped through Plainfield. With a separation from her husband she moved away from Illinois for a few years but continued to garden.

Clarice worked as a nurse for 30 years, including hospice care. She has written books concerning the spiritual and physical healing of patients and on death

and grief, a subject she is intimately familiar with, having lost her son in a motorcycle accident while in the line of duty as a member of the Kansas City Police Department. With her background of healing she began the creation of a therapeutic garden where visitors could calm their mind through meditation or quiet reflection. The garden was also designed to accommodate physical mobility needs and provide a comfortable place for social interactions. The Garden Club set aside front plots with hard 5-foot wide paths so that those using walkers or wheelchairs could easily reach the gazebo where they could rest comfortably, watch the birds at the feeders and listen to the trickle of water from a nearby garden fountain. In the summer the gazebo trellis is covered with climbing vines of red roses, trumpet vines and royal purple clematis that provide additional shade.

The Holmstad garden was included in a bi-annual walk of beautiful gardens in the local area sponsored by the Batavia Plain Dirt Gardeners, an organization that encourages gardening and sponsors worthwhile gardening projects. Over 400 visited the garden while musicians strolled the footpaths playing their instruments. Formal tea and deserts were served in the Holmstad Auditorium for the garden guests.

The Holmstad Garden Club considers the gazebo and the surrounding perennial and herb garden their gift to other residents and their guests. Daily visits are encouraged to 'receive your vitamin D' and observe the garden as it changes with new growth. It is a place of peace where people can come, rest awhile, visit, commune with nature, listen to the birds, feel the breeze, bask in the outdoor air, smell the fresh smells of earth.