



# Blocks in Bloom

by Kathy Lewis

**LEFT:** Jackie Graham, block captain, shows off her garden.

**RIGHT:** Jackie Graham's garden on planting day.

I'm old enough to remember student protesters placing flowers in the barrels of National Guard guns in the 1970s. It was called "Flower Power." This same phrase could be applied to a new "Blocks in Bloom" initiative in inner city Rochester that I started last year along with other Master Gardeners.

Blocks in Bloom uses front yard flower gardening as a tool to grow community. The basic steps are simple.

- Identify inner city blocks where at least 6 households want to start a front yard flower garden.
- Match it with a pair of Master Gardener "mentors"
- Visit each yard to see where the gardener wants to plant, and assess light and other characteristics (while teaching a few gardening principles)
- Schedule a time for each block to prepare their garden beds
- Gather donated perennial plants
- Hold a work day where gardeners plant with advice from Master Gardeners
- Master Gardeners visit periodically throughout the growing season to mentor.

The results are magical. "All of our yards look 300% better" says Reverend Cynthia Cole, block captain of her Blocks in Bloom project. "And we had fun! We knew each other already, but together we had a great learning experience and we became more neighborly as a result of this shared project."

The effort started as a seedling in 2014—two pilot blocks and two Master Gardeners. Our participants were so enthusiastic we decided to try scaling the project up. Some were skeptical that we could find enough other Master Gardeners willing to volunteer in neighborhoods known better for headlines of violence than for gardens. With the help of our sponsoring organization, Cooperative Extension of Monroe County, we inserted an appeal in the Master Gardener newsletter and made pitches at a couple of their monthly meetings. The result was gratifying—15 volunteers, including the husband of one of the Master Gardeners. Gratifying and overwhelming, since that presented the dual challenges of finding enough interested blocks and enough donated plants to supply the new gardens.



**ABOVE:** Plant pick up day for Blocks in Bloom groups. May 18, 2015.

organized loosely into “shade lovers” “sun lovers” and “part sun/part shade”. Each block captain was assigned a time to pick up the plants for his or her block. As each arrived we helped them select the plants, using simple assessment forms we had drawn up for each garden. Later that day the Master Gardeners went to their blocks and helped place the plants in the best location in each garden. After this, the residents planted their own plants, sometimes working in pairs or small groups.

The City of Rochester is a very important partner for Blocks in Bloom. They have donated and delivered compost and mulch to each of the participating blocks, using a vacant lot as a drop-off point right before the garden preparation work day. The City also donated gardening gloves and large trash bags for yard waste, as part of their “Clean Sweep” city cleanup initiative.

As any seasoned gardener knows, planting is the middle of the process, not the end. This is a point that new gardeners often don’t appreciate. On subsequent visits the Master Gardeners talked about how to tell weeds from plants, how to pull out weeds by the roots and the importance of watering (though two wet summers helped immensely on this score). Also, gardening with perennials requires patience. Plants take off in their second or third years. Some residents wanted the instant color that only comes with annuals. A number of them filled in gaps by buying annuals—available at low cost at the Public Market—Rochester’s award-winning farmer’s market. Some scorned offers of plants that looked boring in May, only to be jealous of that gorgeous crocosmia in their neighbor’s garden in August.

Blocks in Bloom gardeners are not all beginners. Some had established a garden already but wanted to expand it or improve on it. These experienced gardeners generally did better than the beginners, but in many cases they also encouraged the beginners and donated additional plants

from their own gardens. In other yards when we did the assessments we found remnants of a garden planted by a previous resident, buried beneath weeds, and were able to incorporate those plants. We also gave advice on pruning existing shrubs.

So what do the individual Blocks in Bloom gardens look like at the end of the season? Most are not showcase gardens, though some of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year participants’ gardens were awash with color in August. In my mind, our most improved garden does not look impressive. But compared to the packed, bare earth yard in May it’s beautiful, with a small, healthy lawn backed by a single row of perennials.

Perhaps the more important question is, how have the gardeners and the blocks changed? The pride and excitement in their own creations is palpable for each gardener. And for the blocks? Block Captain Jackie Graham says it all. “We’re getting a lot more people interested in home beautification—aware of their house and their street. They get out now, socialize more, and even trade plants.”

Blocks in Bloom is an initiative that could be replicated in any community. The Rochester organizers are happy to share our experiences and our materials with anyone who would like to start a similar project. And the future in Rochester? We are limited only by the number of willing volunteer mentors and donated plants. There are plenty of blocks that would like to participate as word of mouth spreads.

Kathy Lewis is a Master Gardener with the Cornell Cooperative Extension of Monroe County in Rochester, NY. She retired nearly four years ago from a career managing human service programs and working on community initiatives. Rochester area gardeners who would like to dig and donate perennials from their gardens in May, 2016 can contact her at [klewis50@frontier.com](mailto:klewis50@frontier.com).



We hastily put together flyers and sign-up sheets, and made several presentations to neighborhood associations throughout low income sections of Rochester. We announced that the first 14 blocks to turn in at least 6 sign-up sheets filled out by residents would get into the program (though we did turn away inquiries from some more affluent neighborhoods). One barrier is that it's hard in January with snow-covered yards for people to imagine starting a garden in spring. Most successful blocks had one enthusiastic champion who encouraged their neighbors to sign up. A few had staff help from a neighborhood organization committed to community-building. As soon as we received a packet of sign-in sheets from a block we matched them with a pair of Master Gardener mentors and set up an organizing meeting, wherever there was space. This ranged from living rooms to churches to fire stations.

The two pilot projects from 2014 each asked to participate again, and we set a higher bar of at least 12 participants. One of the two increased from 6 households in 2014 to 21 in 2015 on 4 contiguous blocks. "It was jealousy," says Block Captain Jackie Graham. "They'd say 'I want to have a garden like that and get those free plants'"

Each group selected a Block Captain at their first meeting and set up a date in April for an assessment 'walkabout' with a bed preparation work day in early May. We encouraged each group to continue to sign up more participants. Some groups signed up over 20 residents. Blocks in Bloom gardeners are a mix of homeowners and renters. Lack of tools did not present a problem. We asked each gardener to have a trowel. All other equipment was shared by neighbors who had shovels and wheelbarrows. Watering in a small garden can be done with a milk jug if there is no hose.

As we identified more blocks we had a rising sense of panic about finding enough plants to supply so many gardens. In one year we'd mushroomed from 15 households on 2 blocks to 150 on 18! Luckily for us, yards in the neighborhoods are small, typically 20 ft. wide by 5 or 6 feet deep, so a few plants can make an impact. Our goal was 10 - 12 plants per yard. Blocks in Bloom focuses on "tough as nails" perennials that can survive poor soil and the inexperience of new gardeners. Luckily these are plants that many gardeners have in abundance. You know the plants—day lilies, hostas, Shasta daisies, Black-Eyed Susans. We welcomed even plants that some gardeners consider thugs such as Japanese Anemone, Physostegia (obedient plant), and Lilies of the Valley. These will present future opportunities for Blocks in Bloom gardeners to divide and share with their neighbors who want to start their own gardens.

The Master Gardeners in Monroe County mount a large plant sale each year at the Lilac Festival in Highland Park, Rochester. Luckily the leftover plants mostly are the "tough as nails" perennials we wanted. During our pilot year Blocks in Bloom was able to pick and choose among the unsold plants at the end of that sale, thanks to the generosity of the Plant Sale Committee. But for 2015, it doesn't take a mathematician to figure that we were looking for at least 1500 plants, many more than the few hundred left after the sale. So, off we went with hat in hand to local garden clubs, nurseries, and our own gardening friends. Amazingly, on our distribution day at the end of the Lilac Festival we had enough plants for everyone. We also distributed zinnia seeds to fill in any gaps.

Distribution day was a bit like a three-ring circus. All of our Master Gardener mentors were there; plants were

**LEFT:** Block captain Diane Johnson's front garden on planting day.

**RIGHT:** Diane Johnson's garden in August.