

[Rochester, New York](#) is home to many of the poorest and most underserved neighborhoods in our region. In fact, as one of the poorest cities, Rochester ranks 12th in the nation, and is only second to Syracuse in New York State.

After retiring from a career of working on community issues, new Master Gardener Kathy Lewis thought that gardening could be used to build community in Rochester's low-income neighborhoods. Crime and vacant lots were prevalent, and neighbors often did not know each other. Combining her love of gardening with a passion for helping people, the seed for Blocks in Bloom germinated.

Blocks in Bloom is a volunteer outreach of the [CCE-Monroe Master Gardeners](#) program. It aims to bring communities together in the City of Rochester by encouraging front yard perennial gardening. Working with blocks where at least 6 households sign up, Master Gardeners educate participants in preparing, planting, and maintaining their front yard flower gardens. Residents build a sense of ownership and pride in their homes, and community relationships grow stronger through gardening.

While the vision for Blocks in Bloom had been planted in Kathy's heart, the path forward was not without its challenges. Kathy needed to convince donors to provide plant material. She needed to recruit Master Gardener volunteers who may not have spent time in these poor and sometimes crime-ridden neighborhoods. And, she needed to convince residents to step outside of their homes, connect with their neighbors, and be willing to learn new skills to beautify their front yards. Kathy has worked tirelessly to overcome these challenges and more. Now, six years in, she is beginning to see the fruit of her labor.

Currently, Blocks in Bloom is an established community outreach program of the [CCE-Monroe](#) with over 29 Master Gardener volunteers participating. Fifteen blocks in all four quadrants of Rochester with over 130 households participating each year. Blocks in Bloom has generously received plant, compost, and mulch donations from several large and small horticulture businesses, including donations from the City of Rochester, as well as garden clubs and individual gardeners. Blocks in Bloom is flourishing.

Perhaps the biggest indicator of the success of Blocks in Bloom is the perspective of the residents participating and benefiting from this program. Lydia is one such resident.

Blocks in Bloom started out as a small seed of an idea and is now flourishing and creating beautiful spaces in the most unlikely places in Rochester, NY.

A single mom working 2 jobs, Lydia did not have extra time on her hands, but one day her daughter asked her "Mommy, why does our block look so icky?" It got Lydia thinking about what she could do. A friend told her about Blocks in Bloom, and Lydia signed up to be Captain of her block. She signed up other residents and they started working together to create gardens and, in the process, address other block issues. They were able to get a drug house closed and move the prostitutes off their street, start picking up litter and more.

"Blocks in Bloom really helped with unifying our block," states Lydia. When Blocks in Bloom offered a training class to block leaders to become mentors for another block, Lydia signed up, and is now helping other blocks to do what her block has done. "This gave them pride and renewed their desire for their street to be safe and beautiful."