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Community garden clubs bring paradise to a city parking lot

By Beth Botts, Tribune reporter

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Winter by winter, the asphalt crumbles. An enterprising seed sprouts in a crack, and soon there's a flower, then a clump.

Then the neighbors come. They clear, they plant, they weed. Where once was a place to park cars and dump junk, they can envision a paradise. With nature's help, they bring community and color and life. They make a garden in the city.

That's the vision of community gardening, and it's not too far from the memories of longtime Wicker Park Garden Club volunteers such as Richard Tilley and Petrina Patti, who can remember digging through construction debris and hypodermic needles a couple of decades ago in the historic park at Milwaukee and Damen Avenues. The garden club was once a handful of volunteers who struggled to care for a few perennials planted along a cyclone fence. Then nearby resident Doug Wood became a Master Gardener in 2002, and decided to put his locomotive energy into the garden club. The club surged to plant grand sweeps of perennials, create a showcase children's program, make the fieldhouse a citywide center for educational programs on urban gardening, run an annual plant sale, put up an information-packed Web site (wpgarden.org), sponsor art festivals and attract members and volunteers from all over the city.

This is not a meet-for-tea-and-chat kind of garden club. It's a gritty, busy bunch that likes fingernails in the dirt. They like to help each other out—"We're a very conversational group," says Larry Clary—and they like to learn, and they like to work together to make things happen.

That's what they've been doing since last August as they prepare the 52-foot-diameter exhibit they are constructing for the Chicago Flower & Garden Show on Navy Pier, opening Saturday. "The basic theme is recycling," says now-president Wood. "We're recycling a parking lot."

It's a pretend parking lot. But the plants are real. And so is the promise. The Chicago

Park District hopes that the Wicker Park club's example will showcase its Community Gardens in the Parks program; Wicker Park is Exhibit A, but the effort also has attracted volunteers from several other parks.

Today, the show garden exists as a roughed-in landscape sculpted from sand and bags of peat moss and mulch on the floor of Navy Pier's Festival Hall; more than 2,000 plants from creeping sedum to 8-foot-tall hemlocks and stacks of kitelike structures of bamboo and handmade paper. By Friday evening, when a black-tie gala opens the show, it should become "Paradise in a Parking Lot."

The Joni Mitchell reference goes right past the 5- to 12-year-olds in an after-school program who have been busy since September planning and making those kitelike sculptures under the direction of artist Michael Thompson (michaelthompsonart.com), paid by the Parkways Foundation.

The kids collected seeds, stems and flowers from the park's gardens and embedded them in handmade paper. "It felt weird, the pulp," says Esther Shirk, 10, who attends the Park Kids program every Thursday after school with her sister Elena, 5.

Thompson's own versions, much larger and made with muslin instead of paper, will hang from the ceiling, evoking solar panels.

It's only one of the references to sustainability in the garden. The plant list is heavy on native species. There will be a rain garden to demonstrate storm water conservation. Towers will bear "living walls"—vertical panels carpeted with plants. And after the show, all the plants—chosen so they can really thrive here—will be recycled to new homes in Chicago parks.

It has taken more than 75 volunteers to make all this happen. Many put in Saturday-morning shifts in a behind-the-scenes greenhouse at the Garfield Park Conservatory, carefully coaxing hundreds of pots of elderberry and lirioppe, tulips and muscari, Solomon's seal and coral bells to leaf out and bloom in March as though it were June.

They all have been tutored by Park District staff, but "we have neophytes and Master Gardeners," says Jim Angrabright, who was among the crew leaders one Saturday in January. "That's great. I love that."

Volunteers Leslie Zimmermann and Amy Brinkman of River Forest chortle to recall their adventures combing alleys for car bumpers and a Lincoln Park Towing sign to add to the Chicago parking lot atmosphere.

And many others have been trained as docents, to explain the plants and the techniques to show visitors and encourage them to try it themselves. The ultimate goal of the garden, after all, is to urge others to take charge of open space in their own neighborhoods and make them bloom.