



Award-Winning Gardens

Entries from a City-Wide Garden Contest Reveal an Impressive Display of Local Talent

By Kathleen Thompson

Gardeners change the world. And if you think that's an exaggeration, you haven't met the people who enter the Excellence in Gardening Awards (CEGA) each year. Some are individuals who, working alone or with their families, create oases of peace and beauty in the urban landscape. Some are teachers whose students are growing food and developing skills they can use to find jobs and live useful lives. Some approach gardening as scientists, some as artists, and some as wild-eyed dreamers. And they all contribute to making Chicago a healthier, more beautiful, and even more socially just place to live.

This past year, entries in the CEGA

competition included schools, community gardens, individuals and even an urban farm. The judges – mostly Master Gardener volunteers from University of Illinois Extension, Cook County – screened the applications, which included photographs and descriptions of the gardens. Then judging teams visited each of the finalists, viewing the gardens and talking to the gardeners. In the fall, the CEGA committee honored 65 gardens from 33 wards and 60 Chicago communities in an awards ceremony at Garfield Park Conservatory. The gardening skills were so impressive and the garden stories so interesting that the almost 200 gardeners and friends sat rapt for two hours.

Take the Southside Occupational Academy in Englewood. Here you'll find two edible gardens, an orchard of 36 trees, and a greenhouse. The gardeners grow a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, using every inch of space. In their pumpkin/melon patch, they grow corn, beans and potatoes between the rows. Everything is done organically, without pesticides. There are bees, chickens and ducks to produce fresh eggs and honey. And all of this is maintained and cultivated by students. They even run their own community farmers market in what has been for far too long a food desert.

One of the original World War II victory gardens, the Rainbow Beach Victory



Garden has been a part of the South Shore Community for nearly 80 years, and three of its current members have been working in the garden for more than 40 years. Today, the RBVG includes retired and working educators, nurses, construction workers and one-time steel mill workers, using organic practices to grow vegetables and create plot borders that sustain wildlife. The garden also builds a community of individuals who teach about and maintain a piece of history in the South Shore Community.

And then there are the gardens that simply make life lovelier. Suan Meyer's corner garden in Lincoln Park is a joy for the neighborhood. During the gardening season, she works every day to make certain it is always perfect. Summer annuals and perennials are accented with garden pathways that hold a rock, a bird bath, or a surprise piece of art to enhance the planting. This perfect little corner has food (tomatoes and peppers and herbs), native plants in the "meditation area" and a colorful display along the sidewalk for passersby to enjoy.

Yvonne Roeske's garden in Edison Park takes inspiration from the great gardens of Europe. Attention to details, color combinations and texture create a diverse series of garden rooms all visible from indoors. This is a mature landscape, a truly inspiring garden oasis for a plantswoman's family.

Before William Hill & his partner James Vanden Boogart's vision in 2015, the east side of the 6400 block of south Dorchester was an urban dumping ground. Overgrown weeds, household garbage & unwanted tires littered the parkway. This landscape has been transformed into an ornamental and found-art garden that is rich in native and culturally important plants.

Patricia Richardson, a disabled army veteran, has taken on the neglected 35th floor garden area in her condo building. Because of a sun allergy from her days in Iraq, she has to do most of her gardening work at night or in the very early morning. Still, faced with high winds off the lake and the other challenges of a rooftop garden on a high rise, she has singlehandedly created

LEFT: Patricia Richardson Chandler gardens on the 35th floor terrace of her city high rise. A disabled veteran, Chandler has a severe sun allergy from her time in Iraq and must garden in the early morning or at night. Despite her difficulties, she has transformed a formerly neglected space into a place of beauty.

RIGHT: Mamon Gibson sadly passed away before the CEGA awards ceremony, but his wife Susan and his grandson Clayton Daniels posed in his rooftop garden and proudly displayed the two awards he received for his participation in Chicago's Excellence in Gardening Awards. The photo was taken during their end-of-season cleanup.



a source of beauty and inspiration for the more than 300 tenants.

Another rooftop gardener, sadly, never received his CEGA award this year. Mamon Gibson, Jr. was an Illinois Master Gardener and a volunteer gardener at the Lurie Garden. His wife leads Millennial Park walking tours, and from their home near Navy Pier, they would walk downtown and meet up after pursuing their individual passions. Mamon worked hard on his rooftop sanctuary, and he was presented with CEGA signs for both 2017 and 2018. A week after the presentation, however, he succumbed to a long illness.

From elegant home gardens to large and productive urban farms, these gardens exemplify the Chicago motto, adopted in 1837, “*Urbs in Horto*.” Applications will be accepted for the 2019 awards at www.chicagogardeningawards.com starting in April.

The Chicago Excellence in Gardening Awards are Chicago’s only citywide gardening honors recognizing the hard work and creativity that make our city a healthier, more beautiful and more sustainable place. The program supports the pride we take in our neighborhoods and help us build our communities.

writer bio?

TOP: The members of the El Paseo Community Garden in Pilsen work on a 30,000-square-foot plot along the El Paseo trail, a former brownfield site. In addition to gardening, the group maintains bee hives, a monarch prairie and offers community activities such as a movie night and yoga.

BOTTOM: Rainbow Beach Victory Garden has been part of the South Shore community for nearly 80 years and was truly one of the original World War II victory gardens. The dedication of the neighbors is evident in the health and neatness of the garden.

