

## History of the Community Garden

### A Michiana Master Gardeners Project Since 2001

In the summer of 2022 as I was preparing for the Ribbon Cutting Ceremony for the new fence at the Community Garden, I realized that I did not really know the history of this long-time project of the Michiana Master Gardeners' Association. Before that event I spoke with a few people in order to make some remarks that day, but afterwards I was thinking that this information is going to be lost unless I write it down, include it in our Broadcaster and website.

I spent a couple of hours looking through the archives at the Purdue office on a cold day in January 2023 and found the first mention that led to the starting of the Community Garden on February 28, 2001. The speaker at our monthly meeting, Randy Stannard from EnviroCorps, gave a talk on Plant A Row (PAR) for the Hungry started by the Garden Writers Association of America. The premise: Plant an extra row and send extra produce to local food banks and soup kitchens. On April 24, 2001, there was an article in The Paper with a headline: Plant Extra Produce to Feed the Hungry. The article detailed how the Michiana Master Gardeners along with EnviroCorps and several neighborhood associations were participating in the project. Suzanne Gray (1999) was photographed for the article.

In the May 2001, Broadcaster, there was a short article declaring that "some of us jumped right in with both feet and chose a plot at the Elkhart Airport Community Garden. On Wednesday, April 18, 2001 Linda Miller, Suzanne Gray and Sue Stuckman (1998) joined ranks with Randy Stannard & Friends to dig, rake, plant and plan." The article continued to describe what was planted and encouraged others to come by and pull a weed, etc.

In September 2001, Lin Miller and Suzanne Gray posted an article in the Broadcaster looking for several other Master Gardeners to volunteer to help prepare a proposal to the MG Board to approve forming a new committee. There was an article in The Truth on Sunday, February 17, 2002 entitled, Gardeners Can Feed the Hungry which describes "in addition to individual gardeners, last year's community wide efforts included Michiana Master Gardeners . . ."

At our monthly meeting on February 27, 2002, Randy Stannard spoke again about Plant a Row and that the community contributed 8,000 lbs. last year and their goal for 2002 was 10,000 lbs. In the March 2002 Broadcaster, there was an article entitled Plant a Row 2002. Many Master Gardeners signed up and committed to contributing to PAR they included: Linda Miller, Jim Maddux, Lin Miller, Sue Stuckman, Suzanne Gray, Denise Sanders, Dwight Fish, Dara Revelli, Pam Geers, Gwen Ferland, Valerie Golden, Karol Canen and Mariann Hollopeter. The article also spoke about plots being available for gardeners and that the Master Gardeners had three plots for Plant a Row. March 23, 2002, Master Gardeners held a seminar for Community Garden Gardeners with topics of soil pH, soil sampling and testing, composting, vermicomposting, raised beds, mulching organic fertilizers, weed control, companion planting and attracting beneficials. These are all of the same topics we are still discussing today.

I met with Suzanne Gray (1999) and Gwen Ferland (2000) in early 2023 and asked them to tell me a little more about the history. Apparently after proposing the idea of Master Gardeners forming a committee, Randy showed Suzanne the list of gardens that EnviroCorps had. They chose the garden at the Elkhart

Airport. The soil was terrible and embedded with plastic, rubber gloves, heavy metals, toys, etc. They spent a lot of time cleaning up the grounds and soil. The hardpan was six inches deep then. They got a list of food pantries in the area and distributed the fresh vegetables to them. Later Church Community Services combined the food pantries with drop offs at one site. The Master Gardeners picked and delivered the food the same day, as we do now. The Michiana Master Gardeners' Community Garden was never a "You Pick" garden as many of them are now. We always harvested all of the food and took it directly to Church Community Services or some other food pantry. It was Plant a Row that insisted that the garden be organic, and we still are to this day. Plant a Row still exists but we now work directly with Church Community Services.

In the beginning, there was one malfunctioning hand pump at the garden. It was useless, so gardeners were forced to bring water from home. From 1999-2003 the Master Gardeners brought water to the garden. It sounds torturous bringing gallons and gallons of water from home or to fill water containers to push around to water and keep the plants alive. It must have been a hardy muscular bunch! In 2004, Suzanne Kistler (2001) purchased a pump, and Rainbow Irrigation installed it. Gardeners filled buckets of water and transported the water to large garbage bins situated around the garden. Then individual gardeners could dip their own buckets into the water for their garden. At the airport's suggestion, the Community Garden purchased overhead sprinklers but found them insufficient. Eventually, Heidi Zavatsky (2000) purchased a more efficient gas-powered pump and hoses, but the watering of the garden remained arduous. In 2013, the Elkhart Airport and the Elkhart Building and Grounds Department installed four pumps with spigots on all four corners of the garden. We now attach hoses to the spigots for adequate watering of the 86'x110' garden.

In the first few years, Dwight Fish noticed that there were bluebirds on the dumpster across the street from the garden. He then built blue bird houses for the garden. The bird houses finally deteriorated, and we purchased four new ones in 2023, for each corner of the garden. Suzanne Kistler arranged to have the tomato stakes and short stakes made in those early years (we are still using them!).

Some early members of the group are still working at the garden: Heidi Zavatsky (2000), Dyanne Zimmerman (2001), Anne Overmyer (2003) and Marilyn Horvath (2004). Another person that I really wanted to speak with was Sue Stuckman, who passed away in 2021. Sue Stuckman and Suzanne Gray were the two that pressed forward with this idea and are the most mentioned in the archives. and over two decades later, we are still producing fresh produce for those in need.

Throughout this process the Elkhart Airport has been our partners. From allowing us to plant on their land in 2002 to building a fence for us in 2022. The Airport and City of Elkhart staff are an integral part of the garden supplying us with leaves and woodchips, tilling, mowing, weed whacking the surroundings and disposing of the remains of the plants at the end of the season. We are forever grateful for their support.

In 2022 we generated about 1,100 pounds of food that was donated to Church Community Services. With a total of over 17,000 lbs. since 2004 since we started keeping records. In 2021, the garden was the target of stealing and crops were destroyed. We approached the airport and they installed a fence around the garden, completely at city expense, in the spring of 2022. The city airport authority even threw a dedication party, inviting the mayor and news crews out from the various media. It goes to show that good things happen when people try to help each other. In addition, Master Gardeners at the

Airport Garden have been part of organizing visits with other community gardens within the Seed to Feed Program at Church Community Services in Elkhart County in 2022 and 2023. These visits provide sharing of information, education and meeting together for a common purpose.

Suzanne Gray said to me when I was gathering information from her, "Thank you for caring." Those early volunteers devoted many hours of their time starting a project and volunteering for years. I want to thank those volunteers who were the force behind what exists today and those current volunteers who are still giving much of their time and energy to support this effort.

Our sign at the garden:  
Elkhart Airport Garden  
Michiana Master Gardeners  
"Helping Others Grow"

In May 2023, Dan Carlson added another line to the sign that he made and put up. It reads:

Sue Stuckman Memorial Garden.

The Community Garden is the longest ongoing service project of the Michiana Master Gardeners.

Meg Mitzel

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