

# Threatened by Development, Milwaukee Urban Gardens Seeks to Preserve Open Space

by Michael Salinas

Community gardening has a historical presence not just in Chicago, but all over the Midwest. The city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is no exception. In Milwaukee, there are 41 garden sites with over 2,000 garden plots for family gardens managed primarily by the University of Wisconsin's Cooperative Extension Service. For a nominal fee, people can rent a garden plot on an annual basis. Against this backdrop, however, lies a disturbing and underlying problem.

Milwaukee is undergoing a dynamic transformation of urban redevelopment as the city is successfully encouraging more people to move back into the city. This development pressure is causing Milwaukee's community gardens to become an "endangered species". Over the last ten years, Milwaukee County has lost more than 1,200 garden plots due to development. Other gardens continue to be threatened by development.

The largest number threatened are 600 plots located at Milwaukee's County Grounds near the western edge of the county. After successfully fighting previous efforts at development, the gardens are now threatened by a proposal from a nearby private college to use the garden land for an athletic complex.

## Putting Priority on Garden Space

Gardens are viewed as a temporary solution to open green space. All Cooperative Extension Service gardens located in Milwaukee County are lease-

holds on county or city property and parkland. These leases are open to renewal procedures every year that are in no way guaranteed.

When garden space competes against real estate development or competing parkland uses, gardens have continuously lost in Milwaukee. Because of this uncertainty, little money for gardens has been spent in Milwaukee for quality fencing, permanent flower beds, statues, benches, and tool sheds—design elements that can turn community gardens into visual assets for neighborhood residents and gardeners alike. Oftentimes, water sources are inconveniently located quite a distance from the gardens, making it especially difficult for senior gardeners to maintain their plots.

## Milwaukee Urban Gardens, Inc.

Stepping up to the plate is a recently formed organization dedicated to stopping the encroachment of development on garden land. The mission of Milwaukee Urban Gardens is to "support the development and preservation of community gardens and open green space in Milwaukee to enhance urban living for all its citizens."

This mission is a direct response both to the loss of community garden space in Milwaukee and the recognition of community gardens and open green space as a tool for neighborhood stability and beautification.

Milwaukee Urban Gardens' goals are:

- To preserve and develop community garden and open green space in Milwaukee by acquiring property under a public land trust.
- To promote environmental stewardship of land held under trust through the incorporation of organic practices into each community garden site.
- To increase the role of community gardens towards neighborhood beautification.
- To build public, government and institutional support for community gardens and open green space preservation in Milwaukee.
- To develop a long-term land use plan for community garden and open green space preservation for Milwaukee.

Milwaukee Urban Gardens was founded by landscape designer (and *TWG* subscriber) Deb Kern of Whitefish Bay.



*For more information on Milwaukee Urban Gardens or to support their work, you can contact the Michael Salinas, executive director, at 414-332-3597 or at msal4444@aol.com.*