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# Urban Gardeners Plant Hope

## Community Pride Flourishes Along With Vegetables

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By Margaret Gillerman
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Sereatha Coulter, 68, used to stand on her front porch in East St. Louis and look across Cleveland Street at a burned-out building buried in weeds and debris.

Today, she looks at a bountiful garden filled with ripening orange tomatoes, melons and green crowder peas.

But Coulter doesn't just look. She's a doer. At 5:30 most mornings, she's out with her neighbors tilling or planting. Now, as autumn approaches, she's preparing for the harvest.

Coulter likes to think she has planted seeds of hope for her impoverished city, a city that knows too much about violence and death and too little about renewal.

All across town, dozens of urban gardeners like Coulter and her friends, Mozell Biggs, 68, and Maryanne Morgan, 45, have transformed squalor into something beautiful in East St. Louis.

Community pride is sprouting. From 4-H youngsters to the senior citizens of a housing complex on Morris Avenue, dozens of people are joining the effort.

The project's organizers held a press conference Tuesday to celebrate the harvest.

"Imagine what this looked like a year ago," said Sister Cecilia Hellmann as she raised a crowd at the garden at Cleveland Avenue and 18th Street. "This was an abandoned lot. Today, you see a harvest.

"It takes perseverance. It takes hard work. . . . It takes a tremendous amount of courage when you start with abandonment. It takes grace to trust the Earth . . . and the power of Nature."

*In place of abandonment, golden*

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Ted Dargan/Post-Dispatch

Maryann Morgan showing off some crowder peas she's grown in a garden in East St. Louis. Four urban gardens are flourishing in the city.

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# Garden

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bright red hot peppers and dark green cantaloupes grow today.

Where once criminals liked to hang out, a scarecrow hung with pots and pans is as scary as it gets these days.

The project's organizers hope that as the flowers and vegetables grow, so will the the urban gardening movement.

Operation New Spirit, an East St. Louis neighborhood group, and Southern Illinois university at Carbondale's office for economic and regional development are the two key sponsors.

So far, four urban gardens are flourishing. Susan Kohler, the project's director, said she hoped to add six more next year. Kohler works for the Economic and Regional Development office at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

The project already has attracted scores of people and organizations from across southern Illinois who want to help East St. Louis thrive.

Monsanto employees at the company's W.G. Krummrich plant in Sauget and from Monsanto's Agricultural group gave money, and the company donated Roundup herbicide. Burpees Seed Co. provided flower and vegetable seeds for planting.

East St. Louis firefighters get water to the gardens, and Sgt. Steve Saunders of the St. Clair County Sheriff's Office brings his crew of first-time offenders to till and cut at the gardens and set fence posts.

Rufus Williams, a soil scientist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, teaches people how to make their gardens grow.

Some gardeners of East St. Louis hope to open a farmers' market.

Coulter says she plans to work in her garden for many years to come — "that's if the Lord blesses me," she said as she sliced onions into a boiling pot of green lima beans.

"I'm from Mississippi and I'm a country girl at heart," she said.

Willie Dell Beard, 48, and her 4-H Club youngsters planted the community garden at 41st Street and College Avenue. The youngsters, who include Damian Powell, 15, and Terrence Monroe, 10, took home prizes for their vegetables at the county and state fairs.

Mary Reed, 63, who owns the property at 41st Street, marveled Monday at the tidy rows of okra with its pale yellow flowers, the peanuts, peppers, corn, squash and her favorite, the purple eggplant.

A third garden thrives amid the senior citizens' high-rise homes at Morris Street and North Park Drive.

A fourth garden blooms at State Community College. Soon this garden — a demonstration garden — will be planted for autumn, the season for the kale, mustard and turnip greens.

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