

# Seniors helping others grow at St. Augustine

■ BY ANGELA HERRMANN

When asked about his favorite crop in St. Augustine's gardens, 80-year-old Joe Wilson looks down and says quietly in his lilting Irish accent, "the strawberries."

## GREEN THUMBS

*Purdue Master Gardener Program*

"I'm out here all of the time, I just love being in the garden," Wilson adds. Before Wilson moved in to Little Sisters of the Poor, St. Augustine's Home for the Aged, he didn't garden, let alone spend time in gardens.

The strawberries may have drawn him to the gardens, but the birds keep him coming back. "In the garden, there's never a shortage of songs," he says. A glance around the property reveals killdeer, robins, cardinals, finches and sparrows. Five years ago, when Wilson moved into St. Augustine's, this city block-sized parcel of land surrounding the residence was mostly a grassy field, with little around to attract birds or people.

As Wilson settled into his new home on West 86th Street in 1996, St. Luke's Catholic Church was encouraging member involvement

in community gardens to illustrate the issue of hunger. One north-side Catholic, decided to take the church's challenge.

Jim Weaver, who lives near St. Augustine's, saw the potential for a garden on the property so he decided to approach the sisters. "I asked them if we could start a garden for the residents," said Weaver, a part-time accountant and Master Gardener. He said Sister Mary James told him they knew someone would come to do something like this.

In 1996, the Little Sisters had a well commercially dug to water the flowerbeds, and as a testimony to their faith, they had watering spigots placed in an area ideal for growing vegetables. In 1997, Weaver oversaw the planting of tomatoes, peppers, lettuce, radishes, cucumbers, potatoes, cabbages and strawberries. Then Weaver and his growing crew of volunteers began expanding the gardens.

In 1998, Dick Wheeler, a master gardener who already had been volunteering at St. Augustine's for a year, incorporated a crop rotation system that helps eliminate the need for pesticides by preventing a buildup of pest insect populations. Wheeler said he discovered the system in a gardening magazine, however he had to adapt it to Indiana's climate. By dividing a garden into four sections, special plant groupings rotate from one section

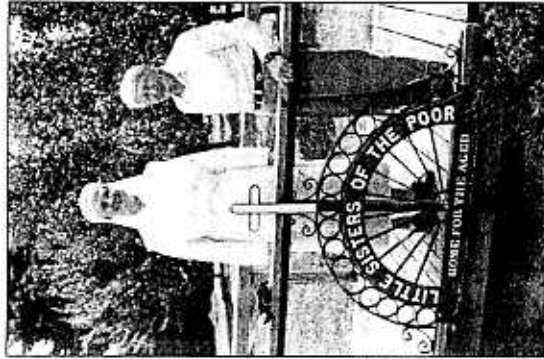


PHOTO / ANGELA HERRMANN

*Resident Joe Wilson, St. Augustine administrator, Sister Celestine Meade, and a host of volunteers tend the lush gardens filled with fruits and vegetables.*

to the next. Weaver said, "With this system, insects don't find their favorite food in the same location year after year." Additionally, rotations are interspersed with legumes that replenish nitrogen in the soil.

Since 1997, the gardens have expanded, exceeding 15,000 square feet, and feature lawn aisles spaced wide enough between rows to accommodate wheel chairs. With this kind of access, any of the nearly 100 residents can help them-

selves to anything from the gardens while staff stock the community salad bar.

Of course, the salad bar isn't the only destination of produce. Sister Celestine Meade, St. Augustine's administrator, confesses "sometimes I go along and pick and eat some of the strawberries." (Wilson pounces on her revelation, "So that's who's been picking the strawberries!") Meade marvels at the "transformation [that] has taken over the property" since her arrival.

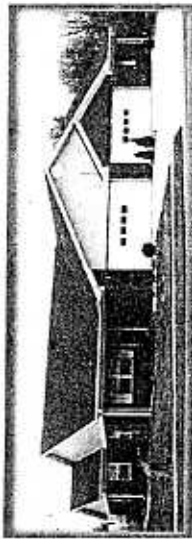
The transformation she describes involves more than flora and fauna. As the gardens have grown, so have opportunities for community to evolve. For instance, Andy Klutz, a St. Augustine resident who grew up farming, has been instrumental in the upkeep of equipment. He routinely changes oil in the tractors and sharpens the mower blades.

Elizabeth Garvey and the students at the Indiana School for the Blind start seedlings for tomatoes, onions, peppers and a variety of herbs. Kelly Shreiner, a young girl who lives nearby, planted a bed of sunflowers to memorialize her aunt who died earlier this year. Julie Avellana, who, with the help of her children and their friends, showed up weekly to maintain two rows of strawberries earlier in the season. Carter Ruffing, a 15-year-old from Chatard High School,

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## ST. AUGUSTINE

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planned to spend his 20 summer service hours at the gardens.

Several volunteers are known around St. Augustine's by what they do: "the fruit tree lady," "the rose man," "the melon man," and "the onion man." And some volunteers partner with the residents—St. Augustine's activities director, Iliana Wagner, matches them with residents who share a passion for gardening or being outside, according to Weaver.

Everyone at St. Augustine's agrees with one thing: The gardens are for the residents' enjoyment. Weaver says the gardens are not about saving money, acknowledging that "this project couldn't begin to feed everyone here." He says the purpose of the gardens is to "create an ambiance or environment."

And a community. ■

**Q. How can I help volunteer in the gardens at St. Augustine?**

**A.** To volunteer at St. Augustine's gardens, call Jim Weaver at 872-6420.

### Events

Purdue Extension-Marion County will conduct two master gardener volunteer training programs this fall. For more information on the classes, call 253-0871, ext. 145, or e-mail: [linda.iman@ees.purdue.edu](mailto:linda.iman@ees.purdue.edu)

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