



Evolving a Community Garden into a Butterfly, Pollinator, and Bird Habitat

Scott Fink, WEAR President and Garden Caretaker, BFG Member

The Chicago neighborhood association, West Edgewater Area Residents (WEAR) is located on Chicago's northside in the Andersonville neighborhood and adjacent to the Union Pacific (UP) North Line railroad. Thirty years ago, the railway embankment was barren land strewn with trash. With the help of the city, WEAR signed a long-term lease with the UP



Railway embankment 1990

Railroad to beautify the area and create the WEAR Garden. At the time, the city established the new Greencrop program, which provided financial and educational support for planning the new garden. The garden won numerous City Garden awards in those years.

Fast forward 25 years; the garden has matured, tall trees have grown, the patterns for daylight have changed and some things have died off. The original caretakers from day one, Horst and Anne Wagener, are now in their mid-80s. It has been a struggle at times to get volunteers to help with regular maintenance. Two of the original volunteers, Scott Fink and Patrick Radoszewski, planted a new garden bed down the middle of the garden. Just down the road a few blocks is a local garden center where plants were purchased for the new garden bed – including Joe Pye Weed, which did tremendously well the first year at over 5 foot tall and was full of butterflies and bees. That challenged the Garden Team to research more about this new plant that none of them had ever heard of before. That's where the inspiration came, to focus the garden's efforts on evolving it into a Butterfly Sanctuary with hopes that it would drive more community engagement. The Garden Team continues to grow their knowledge and appreciation of native plants and the spectrum of pollinators, butterflies,



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The Joe Pye Weed that inspired them all

bees, birds, etc. that use it. Over the next few years, the Garden Team expanded the assortment of native pollinator friendly plants through a new acquaintance, Dolly Foster, a well-known Master Gardener in northwest Indiana. Dolly provided a huge assortment of seeds for pollinator plants and education for using the [winter sowing milk jug method](#) to get them started.

At the south end of the garden was an abandoned lot that was formerly a cell phone tower. In the fall of 2022, the Garden Team took it over and planted a variety of native plants based on a design created by Possibility Place, an Illinois nursery that specializes in locally native plants. The area required a huge amount of preparation before the team planted elderberry, gooseberry, wild blackberry, choke cherry, coral berry, St. Johns wort, a chinkapin oak tree and black cherry tree, along with prairie drop seed grasses.

The Team's latest project for the new south garden is a mural created by a local Chicago artist, Cheri Charlton, in collaboration with the Illinois Audubon Society. The mural features three panels of migrating and local birds. WEAR has been fundraising to cover the costs and hopes to complete the mural in Spring 2024.

To learn more about the Horst & Anna Wagener WEAR Garden, visit WEARChicago.org/wear-garden.



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