

Urban Flower Power: Gardens Turn Blighted Burton Street Area Into Oasis Of Color

ONE PERSON'S INFLUENCE

By THERESA SULLIVAN BARGER Special to The Courant, April 23, 2010

For three years, at the end of her day working as a mental health counselor, Nicola Allen would go driving through suburban neighborhoods rather than head immediately home to Burton Street in Hartford's North End.



JOHN WOIKE/HARTFORD COURANT / April 7, 2010

Nicola Allen in front of her Burton Street home and garden

When Nicola Allen told her neighbors 12 years ago that she wanted to take down the fence that surrounded her home they said she was crazy. Three years later she started on her garden and now is trying to transform her Burton Street neighborhood one garden at a time.

"I just drove around because I hated to come home," she said. Drug dealers roamed her street, residents kept to themselves and people littered with impunity.

She tried talking her husband, Aldwin Allen, into moving to the suburbs. But the young couple who grew up in Hartford had agreed to live in the city for 20 years and try to improve it.

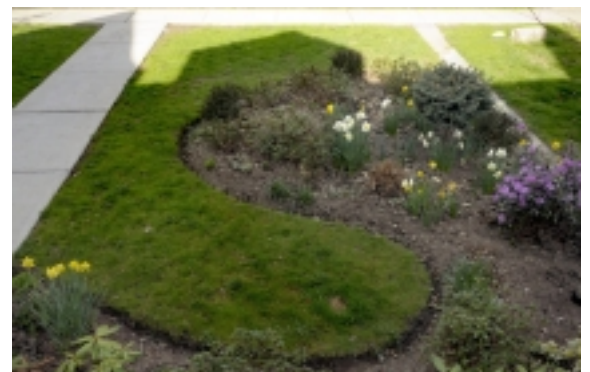
He suggested she find a way to fix what she didn't like. She began to notice that the historic homes on Burton Street had much of the same architectural detailing and character as

the suburban homes.

She said she thought to herself, "It's not the houses; it's the people." Suburban homeowners took pride in their homes and landscapes. She decided to make her property look more like the landscapes she admired.

In the beginning, Allen didn't know a pansy from a petunia.

She bought two gardening books and haunted garden shops, not buying, at first, but asking endless questions. When she saw something she liked in a suburban garden, she'd try to figure out what it was in her book or at the garden store.





It took her about six years of planting, she said, before her garden looked good. She moved burning bushes from the front to the side property line. She added daffodils, rhododendrons, hyacinths, an ornamental pear tree, daylilies, purple asters, salvia, alliums, azaleas, tulips and roses.

Once her plants were established three years ago, she and her husband decided to take down the chain-link fence in front of their house.

"People came from across the street and told me I was nuts," she said. People will steal the plants, they warned.

"I said, 'I don't think they will.' Everyone on the street said, 'You don't know where you live!'"

The fences trapped litter and created barriers.

"There are lovely people living on this street," Allen said. "The homes here, the people here don't match the reputation of here. ... My neighbor made soup for me every time I had a baby."

Since removing her fence, Allen, 37, has persuaded many of her neighbors to take their fences down, too, and they've planted or allowed her to plant flowers, shrubs and ornamental trees in their yards. She and her husband, who have lived on Burton Street for 12 years, have three children, ages 8, 6 and 4. Allen gave up her job when their first child was born but always made time for gardening.

One year, she spent \$182 to buy 12,740 bulbs on clearance, which she planted throughout the neighborhood. She has planted 20 gardens on Burton and Sigourney streets and helped more than 20 homeowners in other city neighborhoods and at her children's school. The owner of three apartment buildings on Homestead Avenue hired her to plant gardens there.

On Burton Street, the gardens of six houses in a row are now unobstructed by fences. The Allens bought one of those houses as an investment property so they could take down the fence.



"Buying houses wasn't in the plan, but we believe in what we're doing," Allen said. By making the house look good inside and out, she said, they've been able to attract desirable tenants. "You're able to change a street by having the right people in a home."

Allen refuses to plant a garden at any home with a fence. One neighbor said she'd like a garden but wouldn't take down her fence. So Allen planted roses in abundance in the yard across the street.

The following year, the neighbor took out her fence, and together with Allen, they planted a garden full of roses. They also removed two rows of tall hedges bordering a walkway, and the following spring, long-dormant tulips broke through the soil.

Strangers Become Friends

Early on, the Allens held block meetings on their porch, where neighbors who had lived near each other for more than 30 years met for the first time.



"We didn't know each other, and we've become good friends," Frances Skeete said of another retired widow on her block.

Later, the Allens organized a neighborhood painting party. Friends, neighbors and volunteers from the Village for Families and Children — where Aldwin Allen works as senior director of community programs — painted Skeete's Victorian house, next door to the Allens'. (Grant money from the city's former Rising Star Pride Blocks program paid for the paint.) Some neighbors brought ladders. Another

brought coffee and doughnuts. Some who couldn't paint stopped by to offer encouragement.

Rod Powell lived in a three-family house he owns on neighboring Magnolia Street for 19 years before moving to West Hartford three years ago.

"I have seen Burton Street go from what was without question the roughest street in the North End because of the drug sales — 10 years ago — to what now is actually a model street of how streets could be," Powell said. The area used to be so drug-infested that the cops were usually on the street five or six times a day, he said.

The transformation wasn't immediate or easy. The neighborhood received a \$10,000 grant for plants through the Pride Blocks program, and after convincing skeptical neighbors that there were no strings attached, Nicola Allen used the money to buy shrubs, trees, bulbs and perennials for them.

Over the years, the Allens have bought three investment houses on the street, renovated them, rented them out and planted gardens.



But there have been some steps back along the way.

Some of the children have no experience with flowers. One tenant's kids cut two boltonias that were about to bloom and shredded the buds to pieces, and they cut a silver king euonymus down to the ground.

"I was so hurt, I literally felt like crying," Allen said. "I said to my husband, 'Why am I living here? I could be playing with my children'."

He reminded her of their 20-year commitment. "If it wasn't for my husband, I would have quit."

Weeding At Midnight

Allen's mother-in-law, who lives one street over on Magnolia Street, was her first teacher. Allen's in-laws grow geraniums in pots on their balcony and front steps each year but didn't have the variety of perennials that their son and daughter-in-law had amassed.



"As I started to do the planting, they wanted to sell their house on Sigourney and buy here. I said, 'What we need is for you to anchor your street. I'll plant a garden there'," Nicola Allen said. Now, from April to November, there is always something blooming in her in-laws' front gardens. Allen made a point of creating flower beds close to the sidewalk to catch the eye of passers-by.

"I couldn't do the garden because of my back," mother-in-law Sarah Allen said. "She planted, and she toiled. I looked out at 12 at night; Nicky was down in the garden."

Another time when Nicola Allen was out working in her in-laws' garden, a neighbor stopped by and said, "I'm going to take my fence down." She asked Allen to help her plant a garden at her home on Magnolia Street, and the gardens continued to spread.

Allen says sowing gardens has reaped friendships, not just for her but among many of the neighbors. "We all share with each other," she said. "Giving, you get back."

When she walks down her street, nearly everyone passing on foot or in a car says hello, and several neighbors credit her with being the catalyst to turning their street into an oasis. "I am more than blessed to have them as my neighbor," Skeete said. "She is truly a neighbor in every sense of the word."

Copyright © 2010, [The Hartford Courant](#)

Click on [link](#) to see the video.