



seeds of change

Heirloom seedlings, urban renewal and an eco-village are the stuff of Garden Dreams.

by Jennifer Szweda Jordan
photos by John Altdorfer

IN A WILKINSBURG BASEMENT, a green revolution is sprouting. It's a low-key uprising. Classical music is lilting lightly from an old boom box. A long-haired dog is pacing around metal racks – and racks and racks – of tender young plants budding under lights. This is Mindy Schwartz's seedling business, Garden Dreams Urban Farm. But Schwartz isn't just selling the start of salad ingredients.

"When people buy seedlings, they're supporting revolutionary change," she says. "They're supporting a sustainable future. They're supporting community empowerment."

As the weather warms, Schwartz and one employee move plants outside to greenhouses handmade from recycled pipe and plastic. The seedlings are sold at the Wilkinsburg farm and at markets around Pittsburgh.

Sales will someday help fund the new nonprofit Institute for Ecological Innovation. That organization will serve as a model for reviving urban communities through environmentally-friendly buildings and shared community space.

"I used to be real excited about urban farming and I still am," Schwartz says. "But this is a much broader picture. It's all I think about now."

That's saying a lot. Schwartz, 45, has focused on gardening all her life. Despite her parents' attempts to keep her prim and proper by sending her to finishing school and buying her patent leather shoes, she couldn't stay out of the dirt. Schwartz chose a compost bin over jewelry for a birthday present and had her own garden at age 10. She hoped her parents would someday go rural.

"We moved a lot, and every time we moved, I asked if we could move to a farm," Schwartz says. "They always looked at me like I was insane."

Her dream never died. Several years ago, three floors above this basement, she stared out from her apartment at an adjacent abandoned lot and considered planting a garden. She ended up buying the crummy clay soil lot for the bargain price of \$650. After a lot of work, the site finally turned her from home gardener to professional when it produced more eggplants, peppers, Swiss chard and other vegetables than she could consume.

"I didn't intend for it to become an urban farm," Schwartz says.

"That happened because I had such excess. I sold it to the Café at the Frick."

Her niche is heirloom tomato seedlings. Heirlooms are plants that have been grown earlier in history and are not commonly used in large-scale agriculture. Their use is a reaction to the prevalence of genetically modified organisms and the extinction of many varieties of plants. Tomatoes are one of the most popular types of heirloom plants.

"They taste so good and they were so unusual looking that people got so excited about them," Schwartz says. "They seemed to be such a source of happiness. It was like growing smiles by growing tomatoes."

This year, Garden Dreams reaches a milestone: selling 100 varieties of heirloom tomatoes. Schwartz still sells hot and sweet peppers, herbs and Italian ▶



and Asian eggplant seedlings. But tomatoes are the stars of the show. There are 16 pink varieties, with names like Millionaire and Pink Accordion; 27 reds, including the Box Car Willie and Cosmonaut Volkov; plus paste types, yellows, whites, oranges, blacks, greens and bi-colored.

The plant descriptions on Garden Dreams' catalog are as intriguing as the names. Like the Eva Purple Ball tomato, from the "Black Forest region of Germany in the late 1800s." Or the Giant Belgium, about which Schwartz notes, "From Ohio, folks make wine from these very sweet maters." And the Rutgers Red: "Original Campbell's Soup strain from 1928, great old time flavor." If that doesn't make you crave a cup of soup and grilled cheese, what would?

Schwartz says the tomatoes "led to one long organic evolutionary process." That organic process – for Garden Dreams – is not just figurative.

Schwartz farms without chemical pesticides and herbicides. She's been growing that way since high school.

But she chose not to participate in the U.S. Agriculture Department's organic program, citing the hefty fees charged to farmers and flaws she sees in that system. Instead, her seedlings are Certified Naturally Grown, or CNG. That's a grassroots program through which certified farmers inspect other farmers' practices. It's intended to support small farmers and to promote information sharing among farmers. It also is meant to strengthen ties between farmers and their communities, in part because it places some responsibility on customers to interact with growers and learn about their food, instead of placing all their faith in a government label.

Interacting with the community is key not just to how Schwartz farms

Garden Dreams Urban Farm & Nursery is located by 810-812 Holland Avenue, Pittsburgh • for lists of plants, hours and more, go to mygardendreams.com or call 412.638.3333 • seedlings are sold from the farm, as well as at the East End Food Co-op, Phipps Garden Center's annual May Market, McGinnis Sisters stores and Right By Nature market in the Strip



and sells food, but also in the events and projects held on the farm.

Last year, a potluck harvest festival at Garden Dreams drew some 50 adults and 25 kids from the neighborhood who listened to a storyteller and African drumming. "This is what neighbors don't do anymore," Schwartz says.

After, as a way of saying thanks, a local man carved one of the sycamore tree stumps on Schwartz's property. "The next thing I know, he's just carving and carving away ... he's carving a sign that says Garden Dreams," Schwartz says. "He came back every day... and kids kept coming around to watch."

That inspired a pottery and carving arts program for the neighborhood kids that will take place this summer.

And it led to plans for a giant community porch intended as a space where older men could pass on whittling skills to the next generation. That will be built on the Hamnett Place homestead on Schwartz's property, which will be the first tangible project of the Institute for Ecological Innovation.

The plan for the Hamnett homestead also includes developing a communal root cellar, a neighborhood orchard and an outdoor oven for

baking bread and pizza (surely topped with her tomatoes).

"Can you imagine the smell of pizza wafting through the neighborhood?" she asks.

The homestead will model "green living," and will become the first piece in an "eco-village." It will employ a composting toilet so waste doesn't have to be transported and processed. Energy will come from wind and water. Carnegie Mellon University Professor Stephen Lee, known for leading students to design and build solar-powered homes in the Solar Decathlon in Washington, D.C., will lend his expertise to the Hamnett homestead.

"A lot of people do urban revitalization centered around big box stores or the arts," Schwartz says. "What we're doing is focused on building the local ecology."

Like Schwartz's other "garden dreams," this is hardly a pipe dream. There's a board of directors including the Pennsylvania Association for Sustainable Agriculture's Western Regional Marketing Director Greg Boulos; Blackberry Meadows Organic Farm manager Jennifer Montgomery; CMU Professor Lee; and Distinguished Fellow in the STUDIO for Creative Inquiry at CMU Bob Bingham.

So the revolution begins, from the ground up. •