



## Gardener Phil Downs aims to feed residents, beautify city

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**FLINT, Michigan** -- Sporting a straw hat under the glare of summer heat, Phil Downs strolled through the corner of a north Flint neighborhood that was once barren, abandoned and sprouting with weeds.

"It was just nothing," he said.

But on a recent sizzling July morning, in the midst of vacant homes, Downs showed how the corner has literally bloomed.

The patch of land now shimmers with lush green and red leaves and is sprinkled with tomatoes, squash, sweet peas, beets and dill.

"I was told that it would never happen," said a smiling Downs, 61, while working in the eyesore-turned-vegetable-garden with a crew of community volunteers.

The soft-spoken retired Chesaning School District social worker and master gardener designed the veggie garden to spruce up the neighborhood and provide food to area residents.

Downs got in touch with the Genesee County Land Bank, whose leaders had explored the idea of urban gardening as a way to transform vacant sites and was searching for someone to help.

"It's amazing the way something can start from nothing and can become so beautiful," said Lavonna Huddleston, 40, who lives a couple of houses away from the garden. "He's doing a beautiful thing."

Huddleston, who sometimes helps out with garden work when she sees Downs and other volunteers there, said empty spots attract trouble.

Some people even warned Downs that a vegetable garden would never last here, that someone would come along and destroy it.

But neighbors, whom Downs calls "garden angels," watch guard over their neighborhood treasure decked with a "Keep Genesee County Beautiful" sign.

"It really does improve that corner," said Lue Flood, 67, who lives across the street and provides water for the garden. "It helps the neighborhood. Sometimes you'll see all these people out there getting food."

Downs' vision is that gardens like this could bloom all over the city and that more locals, especially

those in low-income areas, can learn how to grow their own food.

"I feel it's helping the community, giving them the opportunity to learn some skills," said Downs, who grew up on a farm and has taught garden seminars in the area.

"It gives you a chance to save money and eat healthy food."

Downs, who spends several hours a week with other volunteers taking care of the garden, is most concerned about food safety and affordability. He also would like to see a local program that gives people access to free compost.

Access to water and a lack of compost are the biggest challenges for urban gardens, Downs said. He looked at more than 30 sites before picking this spot on the corner of Home Avenue and Chestnut Street that has sunlight but also shade from a nearby silver maple tree.

The garden lover designed the site to look like a perennial garden with plants that have different textures and heights and are divided by a weaving walking path.

Land Bank lead planner Christina Kelly said Downs' garden is a pilot project and it is hoped that more will follow.

"He's really passionate and wants people to be empowered to grow their own food and use wetlands wisely," Kelly said of Downs.

"The vegetable garden he designed on this site is very attractive. It's a good example of how you can put a vacant property back into productive use. It's just extremely valuable."

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