

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. [Order a reprint of this article now.](#)

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY



October 19, 2009

THIS LAND

Amid Ruin of Flint, Seeing Hope in a Garden

By [DAN BARRY](#)

FLINT, Mich.

On one side of the fertile lot stands an abandoned house, stripped long ago for scrap. On the other side, another abandoned house, windows boarded, structure sagging. And diagonally across the street, two more abandoned houses, including one blackened by a fire maybe a year ago, maybe two.

But on this lot, surrounded by desertion in the north end of Flint, the toughest city in America, collard greens sprout in verdant surprise. Although the broccoli and turnips and snap peas have been picked, it is best to wait until deep autumn for the greens, says the garden's keeper, Harry Ryan. The frost lends sweetness to the leaves.

His is not just another tiny community garden growing from a gap in the urban asphalt. This one lot is really 10 contiguous lots where a row of houses once stood. On this spot, the house burned down. ("I was the one who called the fire department.") On that spot, the house was lost to back taxes. ("An older guy; he was trying to fix it up, and he was struggling.")

Garbage and chest-high overgrowth filled the domestic void of these lots on East Piper Avenue until four years ago, when Mr. Ryan decided one day: no. After receiving the proper permission, he began clearing the land.

Rose Barber, 56, a neighbor who keeps a 30-inch Louisville Slugger, a Ryne Sandberg model, by her front door, offered her help. Then came Andre Jones, 40, another neighbor, using his shovel to do the backbreaking work of uncovering long stretches of sidewalk, which had disappeared under inches of soil, weeds and municipal neglect.

East Piper Avenue now has its sidewalk back, along with a vegetable garden, a grassy expanse where a children's playground will be built, and, close to one of those abutting abandoned houses, a mix-and-match orchard of 18 young fruit trees.

"This is a Golden Delicious tree," Mr. Ryan says, reading the tags on the saplings. "This is a Warren pear. That's a McIntosh. This is a Mongolian cherry tree. ..."

In many ways, this garden on East Piper Avenue reflects all of Flint, a city working hard to re-invent itself, a city so weary of serving as the country's default example of post-industrial decline. Nearly every day its visitors' bureau sends out a "Changing Perceptions of Flint" e-mail message that includes a call to defend the

city's honor:

"If a blogger is bashing Flint and Genesee County, go post a positive message. If there is an article about the depressed economy in Flint, go post something uplifting."

But uplifting and depressing both describe Flint, where encouraging development grows beside wholesale abandonment. You can visit one of the first-class museums (at the moment, the Flint Institute of Arts has a music-enhanced exhibit of rock 'n' roll posters), then drive past rows of vacant, vandalized houses that convey a [Hurricane Katrina](#) despair — though Flint's hurricane came in the form of the automobile industry's collapse.

No question: Downtown Flint, about five miles from Mr. Ryan's garden, suddenly feels vital. A large civil engineering firm has built an office there, and the headquarters of a second large firm is about to open. New dormitory rooms at the [University of Michigan](#)-Flint are full. New restaurants have popped up, including an Irish pub in a long-closed men's clothing store. An old flophouse is now a smart apartment complex. The majestic Durant Hotel, vacant for 35 years, is being transformed into apartments for students and young professionals.

And just last week, [General Motors](#) announced a \$230 million investment in four local factories as part of its plan to build a new generation of [fuel-efficient](#) cars.

But Dayne Walling, the recently elected mayor, says these developments, while exciting, tell but one side of the city's story. The other side: a steep decline in the tax base, an unemployment rate hovering around 25 percent, rising health care and pension costs, drastic cutbacks in municipal services, a legacy of fiscal mismanagement — and, of course, the loss of some 70,000 jobs at General Motors, the industry that defined Flint for nearly a century.

The job loss, compounded by the recession, has led to an astonishing plunge in the city's population — to about 110,000, and falling, from roughly 200,000 in 1960. Thousands of abandoned houses now haunt the 34-square-mile city; one in four houses is said to be vacant.

As a result, Flint finds itself the centerpiece of a national debate about so-called shrinking cities, in which mostly abandoned neighborhoods might become green space, and their residents would be encouraged to live closer to a downtown core.

The matter is being pressed here by the Genesee County Land Bank, which acquires foreclosed properties and works with communities to restore or demolish them. It has been sponsoring a series of forums titled "Strengthening Our Community in the Face of Population Decline."

Mayor Walling, though, prefers to talk about sustainable cities, rather than shrinking cities. He imagines the Flint of 2020 as a city of 100,000, with a vibrant downtown surrounded by greener neighborhoods, in which residents have doubled their lot sizes by acquiring adjacent land where houses once stood.

"We're down, but we're not out," he says. "And that's a classic American story."

Part of that classic story is up in the north end, on East Piper Avenue, where some people are trying to make

use of one of the few abundant resources in Flint: land.

Harry Ryan, 59, the child of auto workers, traveled for years as a rhythm and blues musician before returning to follow his parents into the auto plants. He got laid off, found other employment, and is now retired, with gray in his moustache and a stoop to his walk.

In 2005 he went to the land bank — he is on its advisory board — and received permission to plant a garden on a lot it owns a few yards from the broken side window of an abandoned house. He and some neighbors cleaned brush, removed the remnant pieces of concrete of demolished houses, and planted hardy turnips and greens.

But the garden could not contain their growing sense of pride in their community. Soon they were mowing front lawns all along East Piper Avenue — for free, and without seeking permission. “We just cut everybody’s property, even if they were sitting on the porch,” he says. “Sometimes they wouldn’t say anything, and that would get us mad.”

That first year, Mr. Ryan and Ms. Barber, who works nights at the post office, bagged up the greens and gave them away, often by just leaving a bag at the door of someone they suspected could use the food but was too proud to ask for it. But they also ate some of what they harvested; Mr. Ryan still savors that first batch of collard greens he had with some smoked turkey.

Today, the ever-expanding garden continues to feed people. Front lawns are still mowed, though now by neighborhood children paid through a county grant. Ms. Barber still works in the garden, and Mr. Jones has expanded his sidewalk mission to the cross street of Verdun, where he has cleared a path past the shell of a house lost to arson.

When asked why he does the work, he just says, “It needs to be done.”

As for Mr. Ryan, he is working on a plan to build a power-generating windmill in the garden on East Piper Avenue in the great Michigan city of Flint. That’s right: a windmill.

[Copyright 2009 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [RSS](#) | [First Look](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
