

Harvesters of Joy

Community gardeners on a landmark property in Germantown grow camaraderie while raising food for themselves and neighbors.

by SCOTT MEYER
photographs by ROB CARDILLO





“For the first three years, I shared a plot with a friend. Now I feel like I can grow on my own. If Mr. Otis in his eighties can handle two plots, I can handle one.”

—Leslie Stones

Awbury Arboretum hosts both the garden and a PHS Green Resource Center that supplies many gardens with plants, compost, and more.

On a steamy early-summer morning, the community garden at Awbury Arboretum is quiet yet bustling with activity. While birds chirp and insects buzz, the gardeners plant, weed, mulch, and water their own plots and the communal beds where they raise crops for the PHS City Harvest program, an initiative that supports gardeners raising food for donation to local food pantries. The last of the cool-weather vegetables are fading away, and tomatoes, peppers, and other warm-weather crops are beginning to fill in.

As the sun rises and the temperature creeps into the 90s, a few of the gardeners gather around the table in a gazebo. On the table is a large, orange cooler filled with sweet tea that they share among themselves and with visitors. As the gardeners sip the tea and chat, they look through packets of seeds that have been donated for their use and check out the sticky traps they’ve been provided to control pest insects without toxic chemicals. Regina Johnson, one of the gardeners, asks if the traps will protect her arugula from the flea beetles that infest it every spring. (They will not.)

“It’s just so calming to be here, even when other people are around,” says Leslie Stones, a Germantown resident who has been tending a plot here for the last four seasons. “I love talking to the other gardeners and learning from them. We have great camaraderie.”

PRIME LOCATION

The garden is situated inside Awbury Arboretum, one of the exceptional public gardens that have earned our region the moniker of “America’s Garden Capital.” Awbury began as the estate of Henry Cope, the Quaker shipping merchant,



“I’ve lived in Germantown for years, and I never came here very much. Then a friend got a plot, and when I saw what she was doing, I fell in love with this space and the people.”

—Jean Hunt

“[At first] we took turns filling 10 barrels of water a week because we didn’t have running water like we do now.”

—Rich Reasoner

civic leader, and abolitionist who purchased the land in 1852 in Philadelphia’s Germantown section to build a summer retreat for his family. It was named for Avebury, England, his ancestral village.

The estate later became the family’s year-round residence, and renowned horticulturist William Saunders (who created the plan for the grounds of the US Capitol building in Washington, DC) was hired to design a traditional English landscape. Cope family members founded Awbury Arboretum in 1916 to preserve this green space for public enjoyment and education. In 1984, they established the Awbury Arboretum Association, a nonprofit organization devoted to maintaining the landscape and serving the community.

Today, Awbury Arboretum spans 56 acres and includes the historic Francis Cope House, meadows and ponds to explore, and an interactive nature experience called Adventure Woods. Awbury has a wide range of partners, affiliates, and tenants, including the Philadelphia

Beekeepers Guild, the Philly Goat Project, and the PA Flax Project, an effort to revitalize the production of fiber for linen in our area. The Farm at Awbury occupies 16 acres of the property, and it hosts production fields for the Weavers Way food co-op, along with beehives, chicken coops, and the community garden.

The farm is also one of the hubs for the 190 community gardens across the city that are supported by PHS. The PHS Green Resource Center offers a wide range of supplies to the gardeners, including seeds and seedlings, compost and mulch, and organic pest controls (such as the sticky traps on the gazebo table).

The Awbury community garden has about 70 plots, each 10 by 20 feet. Members are limited to one plot per person, and the waiting list to join is always full. “The garden is run independently [by a commit-



“Gardening here gives me a chance to experiment to see what kinds of food I can grow.”

—Jeannie Gerth (with Timothy Hill)

tee of the members], but it has land security and organizational support from the arboretum, which allows the members to focus on gardening,” says Adam Hill, PHS director of community gardens.

“Just look around at the beautiful trees and at this beautiful place; it’s a meditative space,” says Jean Hunt, who has been a volunteer caring for the chickens and took over a plot in the garden during the COVID pandemic. “I wanted something practical that I could put my hands on. I had never grown vegetables, and I love the challenge of learning.”

DEEP ROOTS

When the garden was established in 1972, it had only 10 plots, recalls Rich Reasoner, who began tending one of them a couple years later. “At that time, we took turns filling 10 barrels of water a week because we didn’t have running water like we do now,” he says. After serving on a US Navy submarine, Reasoner worked as a Philadelphia firefighter for 25 years. He says the garden has always been a respite from the stress of his job and other aspects of life. “I don’t know what I would do without it,” says Reasoner, who is now retired. “I started working for a florist when I was 13 years old. I guess a love of plants and gardening is just in me.”

He points out the ‘Roma II’ beans he’s growing (“they’re the best”) and the ‘Mr. Stripey’ heirloom tomatoes he anticipates harvesting later in the season. The asparagus has passed its prime, and he is glad. “I don’t particularly care for it. My wife enjoys it, and you know what that means—I’m eating it,” he says with a chuckle. “My wife likes to dig in the dirt too. That makes for a happy life.”

Growing food also brings Jeannie Gerth joy. “I want to have control over the food my family and I eat,” she says. “I’ve been coming to Awbury since I moved to this neighborhood in 2016, and I got a garden plot about six years ago.





“It’s very therapeutic to be out here with the birds and the flowers and the friendly gardeners.”

—Sylvia Bey (at right with her sister Donna El)

I live in a little row house without much room to garden, so I have a plot and my husband has one.” Gerth takes a leading role in maintaining the communal beds. “We’re planting them with perennial crops that will continue to produce food for our neighbors for many years.”

Sylvia Bey has been tending a bed for nearly two decades. She moved from Germantown to Chestnut Hill a few years ago but kept her plot in the garden and visits as often as possible. “It’s very therapeutic to be out here with the birds and the flowers and the friendly gardeners,” she says. In 2024, Bey asked her sister, Donna El, to share the plot. “We are vegetarians, and we want our food to be really fresh,” El says. “So far this year, we’ve had lots of fresh greens, like kale, bok choy, beets, and carrots.” Bey has reserved a little space in their plot for ornamentals she will use to make pressed-flower projects for entry in the PHS Philadelphia Flower Show. “I’ve won an ‘honorable mention’ ribbon a couple times,” she reports.

SHARED EXPERIENCES

As visitors wander through the garden, they see a wide range of crop choices, gardening styles, and levels of upkeep. Several of the members refer to Otis Bing as the “Sweet Potato Man” because he loves raising them. “I grew up on a farm



“You sometimes have to take out good plants so others have room to grow. Those are hard choices.”

—Rachel Ehrgood

“I come here because it’s so peaceful.”

—Otis Bing





“I love my fellow gardeners, but the best days are when I start early in the morning and I’m here by myself. It’s so quiet.”

—Gerry Ahmad

in South Carolina, and I didn’t like the farm chores back then,” says Bing, whose sister and nephew also have plots in the garden. “I come here because it’s so peaceful.” His orderly plot with rows of sweet potatoes, tomatoes, squash, and string beans shows his feelings about working in the soil have changed.

Medicinal herbs, such as chamomile and lemon balm, along with a few volunteer tomatoes, dominate the plot of Rachel Ehrgood. “I’m from Jersey, so gardening is my heritage,” she says with a playfully proud smile. A visual artist, Ehrgood has been gardening at Awbury since 2017. She enjoys making herbal teas, tinctures, salves, and balms for self-care. “We feed the earth, and it feeds us.”

Nourishing the neighborhood brings Gerry Ahmad to the garden on the hot summer morning. A retired computer programmer who has been a garden member for 23 years, Ahmad takes a break from clearing out weeds from overgrown communal beds to talk to a visitor. Gardening “keeps me fit, keeps me active. I got to keep moving,” she exclaims. Most of the vegetable seedlings provided by PHS are planted in the

GARDEN SUPPORT

With more than 15 percent of Philadelphia residents facing food insecurity, community gardens play a vital role in providing fresh produce to pantries and other emergency food distributors. “About 190 participate in the PHS Community Gardens program, and about 125 of them actively contribute food through City Harvest,” says Adam Hill, PHS director of community gardens. “Some gardens donate 2,000 pounds annually, and some 500. Gardens in the network donate to 98 different locations across the city.” PHS buttresses the effort in a variety of ways.

EDUCATION AND TRAINING Each spring and fall, PHS offers Garden Tenders training. The six-week course teaches community gardeners about managing their spaces, people, and resources. Workshops on specific topics for growing food are presented throughout the year. PHS experts also give technical assistance in overcoming challenges in establishing and maintaining a garden.

INFRASTRUCTURE IMPROVEMENTS PHS helps community gardens secure permits and gather resources for completing construction projects, adding water access, and making other upgrades to their spaces.

SEEDS, SEEDLINGS, AND SUPPLIES In spring, early summer, and late summer, PHS distributes hundreds of thousands of vegetable seedlings to participating gardeners. The growers can also get seeds, organic pest control products, topsoil, compost, mulch, wooden stakes, and more. Tool libraries at Awbury and Glenwood Green Acres allow community gardeners to borrow power equipment, hand tools, and helpful items such as microphones and speakers for special events.

LAND PRESERVATION Neighborhood Gardens Trust, a PHS affiliate, collaborates with gardeners, local organizations, property owners, and the City of Philadelphia to secure ownership or long-term leases for community-managed open spaces to prevent the threat of development or other reuse from supplanting them.

To learn how you can help, go to PHSonline.org/programs/community-gardens.

“My mother always had a garden at our house when I was growing up, and I liked it. But I didn’t have much time when I was raising my kids. When they were grown, my brother, who had a plot here, told me to come over.”

—Regina Johnson



“I’m excited to grow collards, kale—really, all kinds of greens—and pollinator flowers.”

—Stephanie McDowell



shared areas, but “I do not put all the seedlings in here. I leave some of them on the table for the members to take,” she says. “The one condition is that when I’m harvesting [for food pantries], I can go to their plots to take some of their crops. Nobody minds.”

Stephanie McDowell spreads wood-chip mulch around the perimeter of her bed before pausing for a cup of sweet tea. “I came to Awbury during COVID to get outside and be together with people safely. I shared a plot with a friend who was not comfortable being with other people,” she says. “Now I have my own plot, and I’m excited to grow collards, kale—really, all kinds of greens—and pollinator flowers. Most of all, I love the community here.”

Family and friends of Regina Johnson’s are the fortunate recipients of her latest garden passion: tomato jam. “I give it as gifts, and everybody loves it,” she says. “I make avocado toast with cream cheese and tomato jam for myself. It’s a breakfast made in heaven.” Though Johnson moved from Germantown to Cheltenham, she still comes back to tend the plot she’s had for eight years. “Putting a seed in the ground and eating what it produces is very fulfilling,” she says. “It’s so simple and yet so life-affirming.” 🍅

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