



The First 40 Years: A History



Jane Schaefer • Mary Ann Shaw
Edited by David Linze



2006:

UCB in Centennial Parade - tiny bags of mulch were passed out



2012:

Bird Garden begins



2016:

Olive Boulevard planters

program at Brittany Woods Middle school. U City schools now have an agriculture program, which is proving popular with students. It covers not just growing plants but such topics as careers in urban farming, nutrition, hydroponics, and container gardening. The school district has the first local chapter of Future Farmers of America.

In earlier days, Shaw led many gardening sessions herself. She found that some kids were natural adepts who quickly learned to prune or use a trowel. She said, "I wanted kids to have positive feelings about being gardeners." Even if they didn't seem to be paying attention, she believed they were taking something in. She said, "Years from now, they will remember that it felt good to work in the dirt."

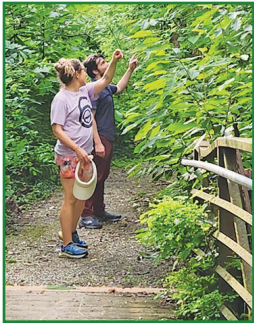


Mary Ann Shaw encourages at a hands-on gardening session.

Gilbertson goes further, stressing the benefits of gardening for the minds of both children and adults: "You are engaged creatively, more focused, and there are opportunities for problem-solving and learning." The spacious grounds of U City schools provide room not just for ornamental gardens but for prairie, vegetable, butterfly, and woodland gardens. These provide outdoor classrooms where kids learn about working with each other and living sustainably on earth.

Over the years, Shaw has given countless speeches to groups interested in public gardens. She likes to close by quoting the prophet Mohammed:

"If I had but two loaves of bread, I would sell one and buy hyacinths, for they would feed my soul."



Visitors enjoy the trails in Ruth Park Woods.

honeysuckle to replace them with natives. This 26-acre site is the largest single area UCB is responsible for.

A garden in Flynn Park is an example of UCB's collaborative approach. An Eagle Scout offered his labor, a woman who wanted to memorialize her late husband with a bench provided funding, Garden Heights nursery donated plants, and the

parks department, in the person of the estimable Ewald Winker, moved a sign that was in the way and installed a water pipe. Most UCB gardens are the result of such a cooperative process.

UCB continues to take an interest in Third Ward improvements, partnering with Sustainable Housing and Equitable Development (SHED) to provide help for homeowners with landscaping and maintenance.

Over the years, UCB has received extensive media coverage and a number of distinctions. In 1993, Mayor Janet Majerus presented a Proclamation honoring the organization at a City Council meeting. In 1997, U City's calendar, distributed annually to all residents, featured photographs of UCB's gardens. In 2007, the East/West Gateway Council of Governments saluted UCB's long partnership with City Hall with a "What's Right With the Region" award.



Mary Ann Shaw, Susan Hopper, and Jane Schaefer celebrate at "What's Right With the Region."

UCB looks to the future with its programs at the schools that get children working in gardens. These were started in the early days and have grown over the years with the help of administrators and teachers, especially Anne Cummings, teacher and leader of the award-winning sustainability



U City in Bloom

In the early days of U City in Bloom, Mary Ann Shaw used to say to her co-founder Jane Schaefer that if the organization could make it to the 20-year mark, it would be here to stay. She would feel a pang as she said it, because 20 years felt like forever. In 2025, U City in Bloom marks 40 years of making gardens in public places. It has been a labor of love. Shaw explained, "A community shows that it cares with well-kept gardens."

In the early 1980s, University City didn't grasp that principle—or couldn't afford to. The public garden situation was bleak. The city had one employee whose job title was gardener. He wasn't expected to do more than trim shrubs and spray Round-Up. There was no point planting gardens when the city couldn't maintain them. U City was removing flowers rather than putting them in. Just when it seemed that things couldn't get any worse, the gardener was laid off.



Susan Hopper, Mary Ann Shaw, Jane Schaefer.

Fortunately, U City had advisory boards of citizens called commissions. The head of the Park Commission, Susan Hopper, and one of the board members, Jane Schaefer, felt that while U City had many fine parks and a splendid urban forest, it needed public gardens, and volunteers could fill the need. There was no such organization in existence that could serve as a model, but they were undeterred. They went looking for donations, plants, and knowledgeable gardeners who would work for free.

Driving through University Hills one day, Schaefer spotted a familiar figure at work in one of the island gardens in the middle of the neighborhood's winding streets. She knew



Mary Ann Shaw because they were both room mothers when their children were third-graders. She invited her to join the new group. Shaw thought it sounded exciting.

The success of what was to become U City in Bloom depended on the coming together of many people, organizations, and trends, and what got it started was this trio of women with diverse talents. Shaw was an energetic and experienced gardener. Schaefer, who owned a software company, had the know-how to design software for ordering plants, tracking expenses, creating invoices and recording payments. Hopper had the magical ability to go to City Hall and move officials to take actions, including writing checks.

What was her secret? "If you knew Susan, you wouldn't have to ask," said Shaw. A charismatic person, Hopper was an effective writer and speaker. Patient and personable, she didn't hesitate to speak up when it was called for. She met with City Manager Frank Ollendorff, and got his support (with some reservations). The University City Beautification Committee, as it was then called, was in business.

"Our first year, there was a lot of learning," Shaw recalled. One day, she was digging and planting at the corner of Delmar and Midland when a city truck pulled over and a man got out and scolded her for "messing with city property" without permission.

"We made mistakes and they were nervous," Shaw said. "It was a bad combination." It wasn't that city officials didn't want gardens. But they were afraid the volunteers wouldn't keep up with watering and weeding, and soon citizens would be calling to complain about abandoned flower beds, and city



Ewald Winker, Superintendent of Park Maintenance.



Jesse Gilbertson explains proper pruning techniques to volunteers.

maintenance and suitability to local conditions, and annuals, with their bright colors and pleasingly shaped flowers. They also have a longer blooming season and "a vibrancy that makes people feel good," as Shaw puts it. On the board of directors, Jack Breier had already begun his long tenure as president. He is valued for conducting productive, cordial meetings – and for his oft-stated policy of wrapping them up in one hour, tops.

More fundraising events have been added to the calendar. Every other autumn, UCB hosts a garden tour, which features the home gardens of a U City neighborhood. For the annual *Plein Air* event, artists go outdoors to paint U City scenes (with the accent on gardens, of course) and their works are sold at an evening reception. The *Plein Air* is coordinated by board member Jo Seltzer, who is a noted artist herself. For the last 25 years, UCB members have helped with the Annual University City Memorial Day Run, which raises funds for the Green Center and the University City Public Library, in addition to UCB. The newest event is a bicycle ride around the city's parks and gardens, which was launched by volunteer Mark Winer.



An artist captures the beauty of City Hall.

UCB maintains at least one garden in every one of U City's 22 parks. At Ruth Park, it has long tended flower beds on the golf course, recently greatly enhanced and largely maintained by Sandra Morgan. In the last couple of years, volunteers from NatureScapers, led by Kathy Freese and Barbara Brain, have taken on Ruth Park Woods, maintaining trails, planting trees, and removing invasive plants like



indigenous to the area, which attract insects, which attract birds and other animals, creating a thriving ecosystem in miniature. Perennials have the additional virtue of requiring less watering and other maintenance. UCB's interest in perennials was strengthened by Schaefer's involvement in the Green Center.



The Bird Garden is an oasis of plants, pollinators, animals...and a variety of birds.

Also in 2006, Julie Feier became city manager. She asked UCB to help with the decorative flower pots along Delmar in the Loop. Maintenance was a problem, because the



The planters in the Delmar Loop thrive under the watchful care of U City in Bloom.

more nonchalant members of the crowds that stroll Delmar tended to mistake the flower pots for seats or trash receptacles. Watering was another problem. The Loop Special Business District had hoped the merchants would do it, but they were too busy running their shops and restaurants. UCB took over. The watering problem was solved first by volunteers dragging hundreds of feet of hoses from business faucet hookups and

then by purchase of a ProGator, basically a water tank with pump on wheels, with driver's seat and motor attached.

In 2014, Mary Ann Shaw stepped down as chief horticulturist and was succeeded by Jesse Gilbertson. He was UCB's first full-time employee. For almost 30 years, all the work had been done by part-timers and volunteers. With broad education and work experience, he is known for combining an artistic sense with in-depth knowledge of plants and pests. In UCB gardens he skillfully strikes a balance between perennials, with their virtues of easier

workers would have to clear them out and plant grass. Ewald Winker, Superintendent of Park Maintenance, would be someone who could receive those complaints.

Yet, from the first efforts of the Beautification Committee, he responded with kindness, patience and support. Over all the years until his retirement, Ewald remained a warm and very helpful friend, a partner in the mission and work of U City in Bloom.

As the volunteers proved their diligence and tenacity, the doubts faded away. City Hall provided more funds and support. Even the scolding fellow became a friend.

Many people stepped forward to help the fledgling organization with plants, money, and labor. The 1980s were the decade when America got excited about gardening, and the fledgling organization benefited. It wasn't just friends and acquaintances; strangers saw the gardens and wanted to join in the endeavor.

The founders were learning as they went along, and many experts provided invaluable advice. Seed St. Louis helped with the school gardens and other projects. Linda Wigen Kraft, a garden designer, gave tips on plant selection and garden layout. Prem Chand, chief horticulturist of the City of St. Louis, provided encouraging guidelines: "trust in volunteers, and don't worry about vandalism." This advice has been borne out; Shaw can remember only about ten incidents of plant theft or destruction in 40 years.



Spring planting and maintenance at Heman Park Pool.

The Beautification Committee's first three projects were planters at Market in the Loop, gardens at Heman Park pool, and flowerbeds in the



Pershing Boulevard median. The founding trio had chosen the projects carefully; they wanted to establish a presence in the Loop, one of the parks, and a residential area. They also decided at the beginning that they would ignore the city's racial dividing line, establishing as many gardens north of Delmar as south. Another policy decision was to put a captain in charge of each garden. Hopper took responsibility for Market in the Loop, Shaw and Schaefer for Jackson-Pershing. New volunteers Helen Fuller and Kay Watts, who had the advantage of being able to draft their children as workers, did the pool. Soon more gardens were added, including flower beds at the Post Office, Community Center, parks, and neighborhood medians and islands.

Of the first projects, the Pershing median proved the most challenging. It got off to a good start when St. Louis City,



Daffodils reach for the sun every spring.

which was in the process of lining Highway 40 with daffodils as part of a major initiative called Operation Brightside, gave the U Citians a box of 600 bulbs. But when Shaw started to dig, she found rock and rubble under the turf. The median had once been a streetcar track bed. With luck, a call to the Salvation Army brought two young men enrolled in the Army's Harbor Light rehabilitation program,

who brought their own sandwiches for lunch. They picked up shovels and worked for hours, asking only for beverages in return.

The next year, St. Louis County launched its own beautification program, Miles of Marigolds, and City Hall gave the Beautification Committee money to buy plants. Marigolds are lovely, but ill-suited to the St. Louis climate. They need to be treated against mold to survive, and



Linda Fried adds joy to plant sale preparation.

plants and labor. Now a fixture in the local calendar, the weekend-long Plant Sale is the event that tells U City spring is here. Customers receive not just plants but the expert advice of the gardeners who are selling them.

The 100th anniversary of the city's incorporation in 2006 brought new opportunities. The beautiful 1903 City Hall had been renovated, and officials approached Schaefer about enhancing

the grounds. Up to then, the landscaping had been mostly yews, with one narrow flower bed.

UCB gardeners sought a new look that city founder E.G. Lewis would have appreciated. They researched botanical articles in his magazines and old photos of his house, and found that he favored the lavish, romantic style whose most famous exponent was Getrude Jekyll. Money was found by city officials, and the results were luxuriant and colorful.

U City also celebrated its birthday by building a new fitness center called Centennial Commons. Nancy MacCartney, head of the Department of Parks, Recreation and Forestry, asked UCB to provide the gardens. The most remarkable one, behind the building, is the 6,000 square foot Bird Garden, which is visible from the exercise-machine area through large windows. The Audubon Society has taught classes there. The garden exemplifies a trend that had begun in the late 20th century: the upsurge of interest in native perennials. These are



2006 - Harry Asher runs a tiller in preparation for the new Centennial gardens at City Hall.



Organizations. But membership declined and fund-raising needs multiplied. New PTO members didn't want to be trapped by commitments their predecessors had made. Some talked of tearing out the gardens and putting in shrubs to save money. UCB's leaders felt it was crucial to provide gardens for the benefit of teachers, parents, and students who might not have a garden at home, even though they were spending more on the schools than they were taking in. Finally, they went to the school board, where they found support from members such as Stacy Clay and Joy Lieberman. When JoyLynn Pruitt became superintendent, she ruled that the district would go halves in financing all projects.

In raising money for non-school projects, UCB benefited from the help of Mary Fahey. With wide experience in municipal government, she wrote grant proposals and made presentations to officials. Such was her reputation that as soon as they saw her name on the proposal, officials were inclined to approve.



Mary Fahey's dedication to U City in Bloom continues to be honored.

Another dependable source of funds is the annual Plant Sale, which is bringing in about \$20,000. (The first one, held in Schaefer's back yard in the mid-'80s, brought in \$300.) When Sondra Ellis moved to University City, she brought years of successful plant sale experience from Iowa City and increased the income from the U City plant sale many-fold. Today, expertly run by organizer Linda



2025 - enthusiasm and community support for our annual plant sale continues to grow.

Fried and plant expert Dalene Tiers, the sale relies on friends and volunteers to donate

dead-headed to keep blooming. Maintenance would be a continuing struggle for Shaw and her volunteers. But at least the first step, installation of the second bed in the Pershing median, had gone more smoothly than the previous one, because now they had a tiller.

Acquisition of this prime piece of equipment had been a surprise. One day, a man knocked on Shaw's door and introduced himself as Harry Asher. A professional landscaper, he offered his time and the use of his tiller. This extended the scope of the Beautification Committee. Projects that had been impossible before were now doable. Asher became the first paid employee. He stayed on for 30 years, teaching volunteers important knowledge about tools, soil prep, plant varieties, and design. He was later joined by Katie Lenn.



Hard working volunteers are the heart and soul of every project.

Another stranger who knocked on the door was Ted Slegesky. He "rose through the ranks," proving his worth as a volunteer, then becoming a long-term paid employee with horticulture training. For many, volunteering was a life-changing experience. They formed enduring friendships with people they met on their knees, digging in the earth.

In addition to family and career obligations and working in gardens, the founders made time to educate themselves. Shaw took courses at the Missouri Botanical Garden and made regular visits to the larger and more innovative Chicago Botanical Garden. Schaefer studied at St. Louis Community College-Meramec and earned a Master Naturalist degree.

By this point city officials from Ollendorff on down were reliable supporters. Council member Paul Schoomer and Hopper even made a game of it. Every year he would



approve her funding request, saying, "We'll give you this, but don't ask for more." Soon she'd be back for more, and Schoomer would urge the Council to approve. It was a loss to U City when Hopper had to move to New York for family reasons. She continues to follow from afar the progress of the group she started.

The city's support went beyond money. In the '80s, U City began turning the leaves it collected every autumn into mulch, which was provided free to residents and local organizations. Leaf mulch was just what the local clay soil needed to become super-fertile; the gardeners called it "black gold."

As the fame of the University City Beautification Committee spread, people began to feel that its name was too cumbersome. Marty Thomas of the City's Parks Department suggested "U City in Bloom." Schaefer created the logo,



a U City lion with a rose in its mouth. The logo went on the front of the official T-shirt, and a saying was needed for the back. It was a group effort to search a book of quotations for a saying that was appropriate and anonymous, to

avoid copyright problems: "People who think they can run the earth should begin with a small garden."

Enough contributions were coming in to make it imperative to become a 501 (3) C corporation, with officers and a board of directors, chaired at first by Bob Lewis. Schaefer, who'd been keeping track of the money all this time, inevitably was named treasurer. Just as inevitably, Shaw was named horticulture director. Judy Prange came aboard as president of the board and proved invaluable at coordinating fundraising, meetings, and UCB's multiplying activities. She later became executive director in 2015.

By 1990, UCB had 30 public gardens, with a volunteer as captain for each one. The '90s would prove to be the decade of fastest growth. In 1993, on the day she became director of University City Public Library, Linda Ballard called Shaw to ask her to walk around the grounds and discuss gardens. Ballard eventually joined the UCB board of directors. In addition to her executive experience, UCB has received the benefit of her skills as writer and photographer.



The gardens at the library add color and texture throughout the seasons.

One of the main duties of a board of directors is, of course, to worry. Some of UCB's directors were afraid that the organization was growing too fast. Volunteers wouldn't be able to keep up with the work. Money would run out. One computer-savvy director came to a meeting and laid out spreadsheets that he said proved conclusively that UCB would go broke within three years. Shaw admits that she made people nervous because she was always wanting to start the next garden. Her unshakeable belief was: "If you're doing something that's right, that helps the community, the money will be there." She was lucky to have a fellow-optimist at home (her husband Dick) and another on the board. Bob Lewis, the chair, didn't want money sitting



Brittany Woods students bag up their Best Ever Potting Mix for sale.

idly in the bank when it could be beautifying the city. In fact, UCB has never run out of money.

One area that worried the board was the school gardens. From the beginning, the founders had felt it was vital to establish and maintain gardens at all the public schools. At first they had received a warm welcome from Parent-Teacher