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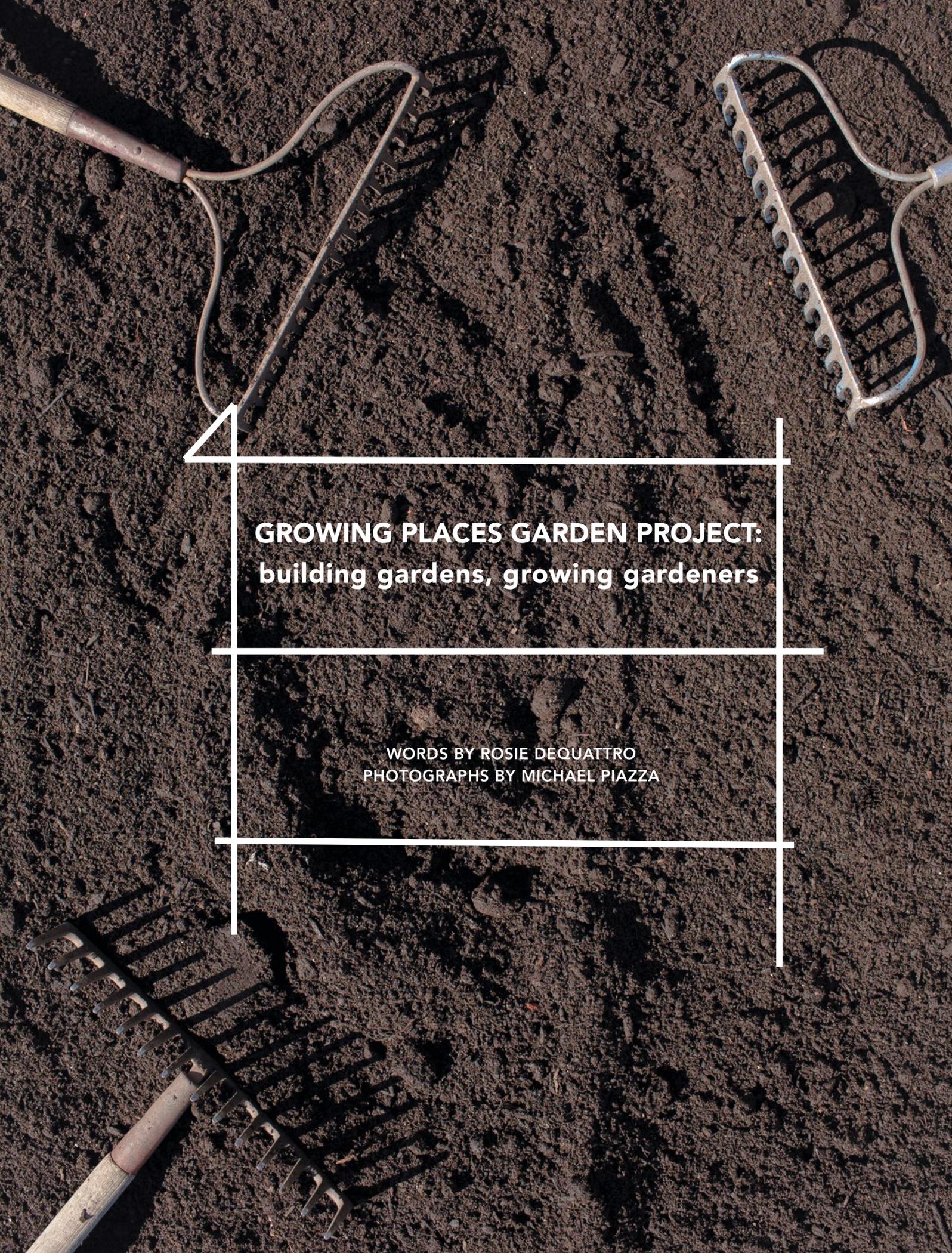
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**GROWING PLACES GARDEN PROJECT:
building gardens, growing gardeners**

WORDS BY ROSIE DEQUATTRO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL PIAZZA

Charlie Madden is a busy man. He's studying for a master's degree; he's writing a book that he plans to publish within the next year; he's a professional Santa Claus; and he gardens. Madden is also about to turn 74. He lives in Sterling, Massachusetts, in a senior housing complex. In 2011, the organization Growing Places Garden Project (GPGP) installed a vegetable garden so residents would have access to fresh food.

In its 10th year, the nonprofit Growing Places builds and maintains gardens for low-income, qualified individuals, and supports these new "gardeners" as they move forward in their gardening lives. "Our mission is pretty simple," says GPGP Executive Director Joanne Foster: "We build gardens and grow gardeners." And besides its mission "to improve the food security and nutrition education of people with limited economic means," GPGP will make a gardener out of you, too.

Madden is a perfect example. He grew up gardening with his father but turned away from it as soon as he could. At that time, gardening was a punishment, "a chore forced on me," he says. Today his attitude is completely different. "I'm 50 feet from the garden [that GPGP installed]. I can look out the window and see my seedlings grow. I weed and I watch." Madden credits GPGP for this renewal. "The people at GPGP made it so much fun to garden and the fun kind of grows on you," he says. He tells me that one day last spring, a group of the most "helpful, friendly people showed up" and within a few hours four gardens were built.

He was a little reckless that first season, Madden admits, having chosen every vegetable on the GPGP application. "I had quite a potpourri of vegetables," he chuckles. "But I ate it all. In fact I just ate the last onion."

Last season, the garden produced enough for him to share with his five sons and eight grandchildren. This year he plans to continue the garden and maintain it on his own. He also wants to be a GPGP volunteer and help with others' gardens—in his spare time.

Housed in a repurposed 19th-century mill building in downtown Clinton, Massachusetts, GPGP serves 21 towns, from Townsend to Hudson and from Acton to Fitchburg. Foster tells me that in its 10 years, GPGP has installed gardens at roughly 350 sites, in both public and private spaces, "all with only two staff people and a budget under \$160,000." Half of GPGP's operating revenue comes from private foundations; the rest is from corporate grants and individual donations.

In 1999, two friends in living in Harvard, Massachusetts, both with professional careers and five children between them, began discussing a project that would combine their love of science, engineering and gardening. The two, Kate Deyst and Cindy Buhner, were looking for a way to apply their skills in a hands-on way that would directly improve the lives of the neediest people in their community. Deyst had been inspired by a 1997 Smithsonian Magazine article about a project in Portland, Oregon, called the Home Gardening Project, which worked to alleviate hunger in that city. Deyst and Buhner found they worked well together and had complementary skills—as Deyst puts it, "I'm a starter and she's a finisher."

So in 2001 they founded Growing Places Garden Project. They established a two-town radius around Harvard and went to work hauling soil, building frames and planting gardens. They adopted a gardening method called "square foot gardening," popularized in Mel Bartholomew's eponymous book. With this method, garden space is divided into one-foot-square blocks, creating a grid. Into each square

one type of vegetable or herb is planted and labeled. The method makes it easy for the home gardener to water, weed, thin and thus maintain.

They installed their first five gardens in 2002. Deyst recalls, "We set up shop in our own houses and were doing it all with our own cars." With the help of volunteers, they eventually developed the capacity to install about 25 gardens a year. But it wasn't enough to meet the demand and by 2007, having managed all the logistics themselves while serving as board members and performing most of the physical labor, they realized "we were running it but not growing it." They needed to hire an executive director. In 2008, GPGP hired its first paid executive director. In 2011, the job went to Foster.

GPGP identifies qualified candidates through its partnership with organizations that assist low-income people. Candidates may come through Wheat Community Services in Clinton, Montachusett Opportunity Council, Twin City Community Development Corporation, Cleghorn Neighborhood Center, as well as through housing authorities, food pantries, senior centers and churches. The candidate completes a one-page application, and if the qualifying criteria are met (income eligible; garden space available; commitment of 5–7 hours per week of garden maintenance), the candidate will have three raised-bed gardens built in his or her backyard. It's a simple selection process but with rich, long-lasting rewards.

Once a candidate is selected, they are assigned a garden mentor—a GPGP volunteer and seasoned gardener who works one-on-one with the homeowner or resident to establish and maintain the garden. Assuming the backyard or chosen site has adequate sun, is reasonably level and has access to water, the mentor and resident schedule the build out, and on that fateful day the fun begins.

Four GPGP-trained volunteers and a team leader appear with everything needed to build and plant three 4-foot by 8-foot raised-beds. Volunteers bring everything—the frames (originally assembled at the site but now pre-built at the Clinton office/mill complex), organic fertilizers, soil, tools, seedlings, the seeds the family has chosen and instructions on how to keep the garden going for at least another year.

The family participates. The camaraderie that ensues, the skills acquired, the personal growth that takes place, the exchange of information about gardening, good nutrition and sustainability all combine to create an experience that builds confidence and self-reliance in both the resident and in the GPGP volunteers themselves.

Within three hours the job is complete. The happy resident, now referred to as the "gardener," will have vegetables enough to feed a family of four for a growing season. GPGP estimates that they save a family about \$500 a year on its grocery bill. And it doesn't stop there. Throughout the entire first year, the gardeners receive expert garden coaching so they can maintain the garden for the long term. They also continue to receive a bi-weekly newsletter containing gardening tips and tasty recipes using all those fresh veggies.

For Susan Duffy-Ticknor, receiving a GPGP garden was an "incredibly supportive and joyful experience." She is a single mother of four boys and lives in a single-family home in Groton. She heard about Growing Places from a friend. Last summer was her first year participating in the program. On this barren, cold day in March when we spoke, Duffy-Ticknor takes out of her freezer bright green beans from last summer's harvest. She'll serve them tonight to her boys. Last summer, the boys were really into hot peppers, she tells me—"they did a ton of experiments with the peppers." This year she'll be more circumspect with what she plants now that she's learned what she and

the boys like and what they all like to plant. "They tended to get overdone with certain veggies, like broccoli." Even her 3-year-old loved digging in the dirt, watering, pulling weeds and sampling the vegetables.

At the end of the first season, gardeners receive a delivery of garlic and compost with instructions on how to prep a bed for winter, how to distribute the compost and how to plant the garlic. In season two, GPGP supplies seeds, seedlings and enough consulting so gardeners can successfully continue on their own.

From its inception, GPGP has cultivated a strong network of volunteers. They are integral to the success and efficacy of the program. Programs Coordinator Lisa Millette heads up the volunteers. She explains that "a big piece of our operation is volunteer recruitment, training and management. We look for volunteers with some experience, and absolutely lots of enthusiasm for our vegetable gardening. We create volunteer opportunities for over 150 people every year." There is a core group of about six volunteers, the Operations Committee, each of whom masters a specific piece of the garden installation, trains other volunteers and provides mentoring to the gardeners. In the end, volunteers learn as much about human nature, each other and gardening as the gardeners themselves.

GPGP has installed gardens at the Fitchburg Public Schools, at retirement homes and, if ground space is limited, in containers. And although its primary focus is planting home gardens and servicing those gardeners, GPGP also works in the community at large, planting gardens to help heal urban blight. David Thibault-Munoz of Twin Cities Community Development Corporation, one of the many agencies that partners with GPGP, tells me that GPGP volunteers came in and built gardens on a Fitchburg lot that had become a dumping ground for drugs and hazardous waste. When the lot was slated to become a parking lot, the volunteers moved the six beds to a nearby neighborhood where families within a half-mile radius could enjoy the benefits.

There are no plans to change much about GPGP for the future, Foster tells me. "We remain very mission-focused, ensuring that low-income families have access to fresh food." She adds that in its 10 years, "We've touched close to 1,000 lives." And as Charlie Madden puts it, "It all has to do with growing."

Rosie DeQuattro is a freelance writer and regular contributor to *Edible Boston*. Her work has appeared in several online and print publications. Read more of her stories at Food and Wine With a Story (rosiedequattro.com), and follow her on twitter @rosiedequattro. Write to her at rosie@edibleboston.net.



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