

A gift of a garden: green activist Dan Barker is seeding many lives with hope.

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By David M. Schwartz

At 5 feet 9 inches, Linda Riley is a tall woman, but her tomato plants stand taller. She is pointing to the trellis she installed to support their burgeoning heft, and she is waxing astonished at the marvel that is her garden--three 5-by-8-foot raised beds spilling over with verdant abandon.

A single mother of three living in a low-income neighborhood of northeast Portland, Oregon, Riley works two part-time jobs and attends Portland Community College full-time. With help from food stamps and the U.S. government's WIC (Women, Infants and Children) program, she struggles to make ends meet. Certainly her backyard garden has made a difference on the kitchen table and in the checkbook, but Riley's greatest delight has been the discovery that a garden is a place where more than plants can grow.

"Having this garden has been a growth experience for all of us," says Riley, pushing aside a pumpkin's coarse leaves to check on the fruit that she intends ultimately to freeze for Thanksgiving pies. "The family had to work together to decide what we wanted to eat and what we should plant. We planned it on graph paper and did research together on how much room we needed for the different vegetables. Before, I couldn't get the kids to eat anything green, but they love broccoli now and they eat beans right off the vine and cucumbers and beets and several kinds of squash."

That there is a garden at all in the backyard is the real marvel. Although Riley and her three children planned, planted and tended it, the garden itself was indeed dropped into their yard like heaven-sent manna. It came in the form of raised beds built out of two-by-eights and filled with premium organic soil--seeds, started plants and private lessons included. The bearer of this substantial gift was Dan Barker, a Vietnam vet and former nurseryman who decided in the spring of 1984 to begin giving gardens to people.

As a philosophy student at Oregon State University after he returned from Vietnam, Barker found inspiration in unorthodox places. "The language in the Gurney seed catalog was so much more vital than anything I was reading for my courses," he recalls with a convulsive laugh. "The catalog described vegetables in rapturous terms, and then quoted people saying things like, 'I had melons the size of trucks.'" This epiphany led him to a nursery job. He worked evenings in a convenience store where further inspiration came from a most unpropitious event: a robbery at the cash register. Four thieves entered the store; one of the thugs held a gun to Barker's head for ten minutes. The experience triggered thoughts that ultimately would serve to reshape his life.

Years later, recalling the events, he tempers the memory's bitterness with compassion. Tomorrow he will nail boards into garden-bed frames and haul wheelbarrow-loads of soil, but on this drizzly April evening he is intent on explaining how he came to embrace

these menial tasks in order to achieve a greater good. "I thought about the people who presume it's OK to steal from other people engaged in honest labor because they themselves have been deprived of what they need. I realized that altering that presumption means altering their needs: that requires changing their environment."

But how? he considered his own childhood in a family crippled by poverty and violence, and a brother who had spent nine years in prison, later dying from a heroin overdose. He even considered his family's diet. "We grew up on Spam and frozen French fries. There was an occasional artichoke but never a fresh tomato; no one had even heard of basil." Perhaps a family garden would have helped, and in more than one way. "It has always been the American tradition to take care of yourself, but there are a lot of people who can't, so I decided that if you give poor people a garden, you encourage them to help themselves. You give them something to do and you give them something to eat."

Dan Barker's idea was to build gardens for people in need--the elderly, disabled and poor. He would construct the beds, provide all the materials, including soil, and impart the know-how, but the recipients would do the rest of the work, from planting through harvesting. He founded the nonprofit Home Gardening Project (HGP) with a \$5,000 grant from the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). The money went for lumber and soil--enough to build and fill 21 raised-bed gardens. A seed company donated outdated but still viable seed packets. (Barker prefers raised beds: the soil warms faster and drains better, is less accessible to weeds and pests, and is easier for gardeners to work.)

Procuring the supplies proved easy. The hard part was giving them away. Barker walked the streets of Lents, one of Portland's most blighted neighborhoods, talking with people and asking, "Anyone want a free garden?" No takers. He left behind 200 leaflets advertising "Free Vegetable Gardens!" and went home to wait for the phone to ring. "It was very, very difficult to convince people I would give them something for nothing," Barker recalls.

By month's end he had three calls. He built the first garden for a man with muscular dystrophy, and the next two for low-income, single-parent families. After he had completed these three, the word spread: the man really does come to your house with a pickup truck full of wood and soil, and when he leaves you have a garden. For free.

Finally, the phone began to ring. It has never stopped. That year, Barker put in another 18 gardens, each costing \$250--about what a family of four might spend in a few months on food they would now be able to grow for themselves. Since 1984 the HGP has installed more than 1,400 gardens. Barker estimates that at least 95 percent of them have been successful--which he defines as producing a "substantial yield." Impressive as those figures are, they represent a fraction of the demand. As I sat in Barker's home office on the April day when we met, he received nine calls--including a request for 271 gardens at a housing project!--but his docket was full for the year. Unfortunately, HUD funding, formerly \$16,000 a year, had dried up in 1996.

Despite the need to step up local fundraising, Barker (who takes only a subsistence salary from his grants) cannot be found in his home office during the daylight hours. "I want to meet the gardeners," he says, flipping through a file folder of letters from former clients. The folder is almost as wide as the grasp of his muscular hand. "Some of these people haven't had a good thing happen to them in 20 years, and now, at the very least, they have zucchini to give away and tomatoes to brag about. Once they've succeeded at their garden, they begin to think of other ways they might succeed. They write or call to say, 'After we got involved in this program we got involved in another program and then another and now we've got jobs.'"

The next day, I go with Barker and his assistant, Kevin Dowling, to a dilapidated four-unit apartment building in North Portland. In a sunny spot of lawn behind the building, Barker and Dowling frame out three garden beds, then take turns at the wheelbarrow, hauling soil from the truck and dumping it into the beds. With wood and string, they build a simple trellis for vine crops, nailing its base to the long side of one frame. The last hammer stroke seems to be the cue for one resident, whom I'll call Jane, to exit the house and greet the builders. She lives here with five other adults and two children. The apartment building is a group home for low-income adults with AIDS. (At their request, their real names have not been used.)

Stooping to his knees and signaling Jane to join him, Barker explains the composition of the soil and the importance of maintaining good drainage by not compacting the soil. Step outside, never inside, the beds. He talks about planting in "blocks"--square areas where the seeds are spaced evenly.

Finally, Barker gets to the good stuff. He hands his new client a gallon-size plastic bag stuffed with seed packets, then starts poking an index finger in the soil, leaving a grid of two-inch-deep holes. "If the seeds are large enough to hold individually, plant three in each hole--one for yourself, one for a neighbor, and one for God. If they are too small to hold, mix them in a bowl with soil, then broadcast the mixture over the area." He makes some suggestions about where to position the plants in the beds: salad crops on the outside because they grow fast; tomatoes, broccoli and other big plants in the middle; peas, beans and cukes next to the trellis; squash in the corners so it can spread beyond the box.

As Barker helps Dowling load the pickup, he promises Jane he will return in a few weeks with tomato, eggplant, pepper and basil plants. He'll come again in midsummer to check on the garden's progress, and he will mail a triweekly newsletter with gardening tips and seasonal recipes.

In late August, I revisited the house in North Portland. The garden had flourished in chaotic glory, and the gardeners--which is to say, everyone in the group home--were abuzz about it. "It's incredible the number of people that this one garden can feed," said Greg, who had become the chief harvester and vegetable cook. "We can make a full dinner with no meat, and we have to shop just once a week."

Looking up from the sofa, where he was leafing through a magazine, Tom waits for an opening in the conversation. He is emaciated, and his speech is slow, but he is determined to make his point. "Every time you go to a doctor's or the HIV Center, everyone says you have to eat green vegetables, but where do you get the money? Social Security and food stamps only get you partway through the month. We still don't have any money, but now we have a gold mine of vegetables!"

Although most HGP gardens go to families, a growing number are in-stalled at group homes like this one, or institutions such as senior centers, nursing homes, hospices, women's shelters and schools. In choosing his clients Barker gives preference to elderly and disabled people, and he tries to adapt the garden to the needs of the gardener. For wheelchair users or others limited in mobility, he builds "double-highs"--beds that are 16 inches high instead of the usual 8.

Gardening was not an option for many of the elderly who attend programs at the Marie Smith Center, an adult day-care center for seniors disabled by strokes and dementias, until the HGP built three double-high beds. "Senior centers have had traditional garden plots for years," says Monica Beemer, the center's program director, "but they were not accessible to people in wheelchairs or people who can't bend well." Beemer and the staff knew many opportunities were being lost, so they contacted Dan Barker.

Fannie Smith came to the center in a wheelchair, eventually moved up to a rolling walker and now uses a cane. She and Monica Beemer believe that gardening had a lot to do with her progress, both psychologically and physically. "It's excellent for improving fine motor function," explains Beemer. "You're working with your fingers. You grasp things, pull things, bend and lift. If you've had a stroke, you can utilize the affected side."

Deborah Johnson, another client across town, faced two obstacles: almost no space for a garden and almost no ability to do the work of gardening due to a back injury. Barker found a solution to the first problem by making half-width beds and squeezing two between Johnson's driveway and the fence of a neighbor, and two more between the front porch and the street. Johnson overcame the other problem by tapping a large pool of child labor--her own seven children.

In the Johnson garden, nothing earned more kudos than the sunflowers, eight-foot giants growing out of the boxes and up the porch, transforming the appearance of the house as well as the attitudes of its residents. Johnson cooks greens for dinner every night, but it's the sunflowers everyone notices. "I can say we live on Prescott and we're the family with the sunflowers. My children even sprayed the heads with salt water, dried them out and ate the seeds. This house used to be plain and dull, but now look at it!"

Clearly Dan Barker's seeds of self-empowerment have sprouted and flourished, but the true indication of their fecundity can be found outside Barker's home range, where others have begun to clone his idea. The first was Richard Doss of Olympia, Washington. In 1993, as a senior at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Doss decided to write a paper about the Home Gardening Project for a senior seminar on sustainable development. A

fellow student who had previously encountered Barker in a terse mood warned him that Portland's master gardener "hates to help students write papers." So Doss disguised his intentions with what he calls "a little white lie."

"I wrote him a letter and told him I was starting a project like his and asked for an informational interview. I enclosed a self-addressed, stamped envelope, and he wrote "OK" on the back of a business card and sent it back to me. I was sort of nervous when I went down there. The first thing he asked me was, 'So, are you writing a paper?' I denied it, and we talked for many hours. And by the time we were through, I had decided that I would start a project just like his!"

Barker, who had just written a booklet called "How to Give Gardens to People," became Doss' mentor and friend. Through the auspices of his college, Doss put 22 gardens in Olympia neighborhoods and on the Skokomish Indian Reservation. The following year, he raised funds for the nonprofit Kitchen Garden Project, which built 86 more gardens. In 1995, spurred by funding from more than 20 local foundations, the KGP expanded north to Tacoma and Seattle. In 1997 it gave away more than 200 gardens. Thirty-five went to Head Start preschools, where the response has been so strong that Doss has set a goal of offering gardens to every subsidized low-income preschool in western Washington by the year 2000.

Other garden giveaway programs have cropped up in Brooklyn, Chicago, Detroit, Albuquerque, Missoula and Asheville. Foundations and other do-nors want to see results quantified in terms of food value. Five hundred dollars is usually the figure given for the value of food produced by the average HGP garden in a typical summer.

But Richard Doss thinks that bean counting of this sort misses an essential point. "Gardening isn't farming," he says. "It's gardening. You grow for yourself and you pass the surplus over the fence to your neighbor. How do you quantify the benefit of knitting a family or a neighborhood together?"

Yet, Dan Barker knows that the dollar signs are now being counted, and counted upon, more than ever. Late last year, he stopped running the Home Gardening Project and moved to Jacksonville, Oregon, to found the Home Gardening Project Foundation. His goal was to start new gardening projects modeled after the HGP in 200 cities around the United States. Because start-up is the hardest part, the foundation will partially fund each city's project for two years. Then, with a track record and vegetable plots to prove it, individual programs will have to persuade local donors to give money that will be converted into additional vegetable gardens. "There are a lot of people who need work and a lot of people who need gardens," Barker says. "With the welfare system changing and the health-care system failing more people, gardens are the most inexpensive method of community preventive medicine I know."

David M. Schwartz cultivates his own garden in Northern California.
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