GARDEN CENTER CO-OP thrives IN BUFFALO

The decade-old Urban Roots Garden Center has more than 1,100 member-owners that have brought jobs to their neighborhood and sparked a revitalization.

By Michelle Simakis

Rustbelt cities along the Great Lakes were once used as examples to illustrate the despair and devastation brought on by the loss of manufacturing industry jobs. Once places of pity, cities like Cleveland and Detroit are experiencing a resurgence. Buffalo is no exception, and an independent garden center with more than a thousand owners helped spark a revitalization in one west side neighborhood.

Urban Roots Garden Center, which now occupies four city lots, has a storefront in a Victorian home that was once a rundown corner store and a center for crime in the neighborhood.

The idea for a garden center in the Buffalo neighborhood began a decade ago, when a group of about two dozen residents, including community activist Blair Woods, began beautifying the area, greening intersections by planting small gardens on busy streets. They shared and swapped plants. They lamented the fact that they had to drive to the suburbs for their gardening goods, and wished they could keep their dollars, and jobs, in their community. Someone suggested the idea of a garden center co-op. A food and grocery co-op in the area — Lexington Cooperative Market — was successful, so why couldn’t they establish a retail garden store with the same community-owned business model?

Patti Jablonski-Dopkin, who has been general manager at Urban Roots Garden Center for eight years, said that the group of neighbors decided to gauge interest and to see if residents would support a local IGC cooperative. “They literally sent out letters to strangers and said, ‘Would you support a garden center?’ And 100 people sent in $100 and said, ‘Yes we will,’” Jablonski-Dopkin says. “It was such a communal effort, people giving their time and their expertise to do the strategic planning and the surveying, that they really felt a cooperative business model was appropriate. We actually worked with our local food cooperative, Lexington Co-op, and they were instrumental in helping us get the business model down and how we were going to be set up.”

That group of people also secured a building in an area that others overlooked. Ten years later, Urban Roots has 1,167 member-owners, and counting. The investment for each owner has always been $100. “We want to make sure that it’s affordable for everybody, and we do take payment plans for people who can’t come up with it right away,” she says. “We ask that they pay it off within a year, and people don’t seem to have a problem with that.”

Sparking a renaissance

It’s not necessarily surprising that a local IGC sprung up where it did, as the for-profit store is surrounded by the 400 or so houses that are part of the Buffalo Garden Walk, which attracts more than 65,000 visitors each year. For the first five years, they were the only business in what was a shabby district.

“We just celebrated our 10th anniversary, and we are finally surrounded by an incredible [mix of businesses],” Jablonski-Dopkin says. “An organic wine store, a great coffee store, a bakery that sources all of their grains locally. We’re finally not alone in this neck of the woods. We’re definitely considered one of the anchors of the west side revitalization.”

Urban Roots has 1,200 square feet indoors for gifts, garden art and houseplants, and they recently expanded their outdoor area to 1,500 square feet, Jablonski-Dopkin says. Two tenants live above the store, and they lease the storefront next door to complementary businesses.

The mission of Urban Roots is to “offer affordable, unusual, heirloom,
organic and local plants, and gardening supplies; foster a working relationship with the greater neighborhood in order to encourage beautification and urban renewal; and engage the community through education, employment, outreach, expertise and volunteering efforts.” That goal has not changed, but as the neighborhood has evolved, so has their product offering and services to ensure they’re meeting the needs of local residents.

“When we started our heirloom vegetable program, we were doing a lot of Italian and Russian and French heirlooms. Now we’re doing a lot of Asian and African because there’s a large Burmese and Somali community in our neighborhood,” Jablonski-Dopkin says.

“We have worked with the International Institute of Buffalo, Journeys End [Refugee Services] and Jericho Road [Health Center] over the years. In collaboration with the International Institute and Grassroots Gardens of Western New York, we even developed a best practices booklet for growing vegetables in raised beds in seven different languages.

“Because so many of the newly settled refugees are right in our neighborhood, we have worked with them directly, thumbing through catalogs, pointing at pictures and using broken English and their native language along with a lot of hand gestures to figure out what they are looking to grow. It’s both fun and rewarding when we figure it out.”

The most popular vegetables now include Suyo Long and Poona Kheera cucumbers, Thai green and Pingtung Long eggplants and Fatalii, Bird and Thai peppers, she says.

In addition to carrying a wide range of edibles, they also have a large selection of natives.

“The way we have Garden Walk and people are very involved in having ornamental gardens, we really are very big on educating on the importance of natives in the garden,” Jablonski-Dopkin says. “We’re not here to just sell a plant and take their cash and have them walk out the door. We want them to have the right plants for the right spot for what they want to accomplish. The educational end of it is very important to us. Setting up the gardener for success is our most important job.”

Jablonski-Dopkin is the only full-time staff member, but she hires five to eight people, depending on the season, who work part-time. Unlike some other co-ops, member-owners are not required to work at the store.

There are other requirements, and a nine-member board oversees the business. But Jablonski-Dopkin, who has a degree in horticulture and has worked in the green industry her entire career, leads the direction of Urban Roots, with final approval from the board. Member-owners have an annual meeting at the store each year, with quorum being 500 members. They can circulate throughout the day to vote for board members, who serve two-year terms. Member-owners also get notifications about sales early, receive higher discounts, and can make special requests for plants.

“They have a say in what happens in this business,” she says. “People know they are making an investment in a neighborhood.”

Unexpected results

Urban Roots Garden Center opened so that residents on Buffalo’s west side neighborhood had a convenient, locally-owned plant retailer right in their neighborhood. What Jablonski-Dopkin didn’t anticipate was that her customer base would expand beyond the city limits. “We opened to service the city community because most of the nurseries and garden centers are out in the suburbs. Now because we work with local growers and we’re able to bring in very specific plants, we’re pulling people in from the suburbs and even from rural areas with our heirloom vegetable program,” she says. “We have a great, symbiotic relationship with many of the local growers, so they will grow specific plants that we are looking for. And you’re not going to find it at the other garden centers that tend to...
be more mainstream in their product. So, it’s really cool how it changed from the city supporting us to people from the rural areas and suburbs supporting us.”

Some of those plants unusual to the area include *Thunbergia battiscombei*, Malabar spinach (*Basella rubra*), *Verbena bonariensis*, *Salpiglossis* and different varieties of *Convolvulus* and ground cherries. They also are “bringing back old favorites,” like four o’clock flower and kiss-me-over-the-garden-gate (*Polygonum orientale*).

Despite the growth, they’ve kept the traditions that defined the company, including plant swaps twice a year, where customers can give and take plants.

“There’s a great communal aspect to it,” Jablonski-Dopkin says. “People will bring their plants in and somebody will take it, and they’ll talk to them about it. There’s an immediate dialogue between people who didn’t know each other before.”

So far, profits from the business have gone toward paying employees and investing in plants, products and building improvements. One day, they’d like to pay dividends to members.

Jablonski-Dopkin says she is not aware of any independent garden center that’s operating under a co-op model in the U.S.; most started as seed-and-feed stores and then later added plants to their product mix. People who want to start a garden center cooperative in their community sometimes call her for advice, but so far, she hasn’t heard of a business coming to fruition.

“It’s a lot of hard work, and you need a good group that’s going to be dedicated and push through. Sometimes the finances and working with banks is not easy,” she says. “It’s important to build a board that is diverse, and having members that have their own special niche. Have someone who is a lawyer, someone who is in business, someone who is in finance. It’s not necessarily just having people that love plants and gardening on the board. It’s people that have different aspects of business that can help guide us and give me a sounding board when I need it.”

The most important factor to consider before starting a co-op is making sure that the community wants it and can support it, she says.

“The whole basis of the cooperative is people having a say in the businesses and the things that are around them,” she says. “People didn’t want to spend their money in big box stores and have it leave this community; they would much prefer to be supporting a local business that’s supporting other local businesses.”

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