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Art-filled community garden a fitting legacy

GARDEN

By **Joe Eaton and Ron Sullivan**

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Vickie Jo Sowell, who created Big Daddy's Complete Rejuvenating Community Garden eight years ago, stands for a portrait in with some of her sculpture work on Thursday May 27, 2010 in Emeryville, Calif.

Mike Kepka/The Chronicle

In [Big Daddy's Complete Rejuvenating Community Garden](#), art, flowers and vegetables flourish atop an unlikely sliver of asphalt wedged between MacArthur Boulevard and Interstate 580 in Emeryville.

The eponymous Big Daddy, local artist [Vickie Jo Sowell](#) told us, is the late Mr. Green, who ran a detail shop, car wash and gas station on the Peralta Street lot. He was a minister – so dignified she remembers him by his honorific, not his first name – and a neighborhood guardian angel when she moved there in the 1980s.

After his passing, a grandson continued the business, but a fire destroyed the buildings and the lot lay empty until 2002, when Sowell approached the city of Emeryville about reclaiming it as gardening space. Now the city

leases the lot from Mr. Green's landlord for \$250 every three years. Each of 20 participating families pays \$35 a year for water.

Finessing the problem of contaminated soil, Sowell's crew built raised planting beds on top of the asphalt. West Oakland resident [Deb Lozier](#), who'd collaborated with Sowell on public art projects, signed up quickly for a bed. "We live in a live-work building with no garden space, just a little spot for a worm box," Lozier said. "We were excited to participate. It's really great to have the space to garden."

All the members live within a mile of the site. Sowell enumerated "computer programmers, writers, musicians, artists. There's a woman with four kids who lives on a boat, and four other women who do cooperative day care." One gardener uses a high, wheelchair-accessible bed. A firefighter grows 11 varieties of hops on a bright green 20-foot trellis for his organic home-brewed beer: "At the peak of the season they look like a green waterfall."

Sowell, whose gardening roots are in Montana, also tends a patch of ornamentals including yellow bearded irises and a striking deep-red Chinese lily that someone left at the gate. The honeybees from her hives commute to work the flowers; the city's liability concerns prompted her to move them out of Big Daddy's.

"I'm from Iowa, so it took me a while to figure out you can garden all year in the Bay Area," Lozier said. "This year we did cabbages and cauliflower in winter; both of them were great. We're trying corn for the first time this season, and we always have Blue Lake pole beans, tomatoes, zucchini, chard and arugula."

The garden's art is an exuberant mix of Sowell's own work – including a blue-and-white metal pagoda festooned with giant red tulips – and student projects from [Andrée Singer Thompson's](#) environmental art class at Laney [College](#). We saw a solar fountain, a reclining mosaic Mother Earth with living plants in her hair, and a monster sundial/sunflower paved with swizzle sticks from Trader Vic's. An apparently airborne cluster of plastic water bottles, like some composite sea creature, evokes the Texas-size garbage patch in the mid-Pacific. There's also a piece discreetly extolling the horticultural value of urine.

A [Merritt College](#) class recently built a clay utility shed for the garden. "We had the leftover clay tested for lead," Sowell said, "and this year we planted Peruvian purple potatoes in it. We're finding out how potatoes grow in clay." The experimental plants look happy so far.

Neighbors have embraced the garden. It's a chance for urban kids to learn that potatoes don't just come from McDonald's. Vandalism and thefts are rare. "One young woman jumped the (6-foot-tall) fence, flat-footed, and stole some chard," recalled Sowell. "When I confronted her, she said, 'My mother loves chard.' I couldn't be too mad at her – I was pretty impressed with her feat."

"The more that happens at the garden, it seems like it's a sacred space," said garden member Lozier.

Sowell sees sites like Big Daddy's as an undervalued resource for urban gardeners. They have plumbing, solving one common community-garden problem - water - and the raised beds to circumvent soil contamination. It ought to become a nationwide movement: "I'd like all the abandoned gas stations to be community gardens," she said. "Build them and they will come."

Learn more

Big Daddy's Complete Rejuvenating Community Garden is at 3601 Peralta St. (near [W. MacArthur Blvd.](#)), in Emeryville. For information, e-mail coordinator Vickie Jo Sowell at vickiejosowell@hotmail.com or call (510) 655-7374.

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