

2007 Garden Crusader

Brenda Brodie of Durham, N.C., Winner of the Education Category

Brenda Brodie has gardening in her blood. She's gardened with her great-grandmother, grandmother, parents and her own children. Gardening is just part of who she is. So when her husband took a job at Duke University in Durham, N.C., Brenda knew gardening would somehow play a role in their new life in the South. "Once we got settled in Durham, I began dreaming about gardening, and started developing some goals," she says.

Starting at the Sarah P. Duke Gardens

As an active member of several community boards, it was Brenda's experience at the Sarah P. Duke Gardens that helped her first frame her ideas. The Sarah P. Duke Gardens have been in existence since the 1930s, providing public garden space around Duke University. Though beautiful and inspirational, Brenda dreamed of public gardens that would play a larger role in fostering a love of nature, food, learning and community. "I saw so many people, especially kids, disconnected from nature and the food we eat," she says. "I knew gardens could be much more than just places of beauty; they could transform personal lives and communities. I wanted to change the public's perception of eating and growing food."



Brenda Brodie, 2007 winner in the Education category.

Beginnings of SEEDS

When Brenda read an article in National Geographic magazine about the Philadelphia Green movement and how it was creating green spaces and community gardens for inner-city residents, she knew that's what she wanted to do in Durham. A friend's daughter, Annie, was also interested in local food, community gardens and building communities. In 1994, the two women teamed up and formed SEEDS (South Eastern Efforts Developing Sustainable Spaces, Inc.). This nonprofit's mission is to teach people to care for the earth, themselves, and one another through garden-based programs.

It's a lofty goal and daunting task. Fortunately, Annie had received training in agro-ecology at the University of California in Santa Cruz. Together they looked around Durham and found an abandoned 1.5-acre lot in the heart of the most run-down section of this old mill town. They got a lease from the owner to use the land and started to clean it up. "We knew that in order to be successful, we'd need lots of support," she says. Brenda recruited influential community leaders to sit on SEEDS' board of

directors, including the Mayor of Durham. They gathered neighbors and community members together from all socio-economic backgrounds to participate. "At first, we had lots of vandalism at the garden, and we got to know the police really well," says Brenda. "However, we persevered, and eventually the community began to call the SEEDS Garden its own," she says.

The SEEDS Community Garden was shaped by the needs of the neighborhood. Some individual plots were made available for residents to grow their own food, and larger plots were tended by volunteers. The garden took off, and soon an outdoor classroom was built to hold workshops; and flowers, fruit trees, berry bushes and landscape plants were installed.

DIGging In

Once the community garden was established, Brenda and the board turned their attention to inner-city youth. They wanted to offer at-risk high school students the opportunity to get their hands in the soil. With the help of a grant, the DIG (Durham Inner-City Gardeners) Program was established in 1998. made possible by a grant. DIG offers gardening opportunities to at-risk high school students.



Brenda and DIG participants prepare seedlings for transplant.

The kids involved in the DIG program are given a stipend and lots of gardening instruction. "Along the way, they also learn life and business skills," says Brenda. To make the DIG experience truly meaningful, the students needed a place to sell the produce they grew. There hadn't been a farmers' market in Durham in years, and under Brenda's leadership, SEEDS seized the opportunity to start one again. The Durham Farmers' Market opened in an old baseball field with four vendors and the kids from DIG. Today the farmer's market hosts 40 to 50 vendors each Saturday and even has its own pavilion. As the DIG kids learn about marketing the produce they grow, it opens their eyes to new possibilities. "Some of the kids never thought of going to college after high school. But after going through the DIG program they have the confidence and desire to try," she says.

SEEDS Gardens and More

Today the SEEDS Garden is a thriving hub of the local community. The local food bank has offices next to the garden where they use surplus produce from the community garden to feed the hungry; food waste from the food bank goes back to the community garden for composting. A range of festivals, garden parties and events are held in the garden throughout the season. After-school programs host hundreds of kids each year. Recently SEEDS purchased a half-acre lot across the street from the community garden so the DIG youth could use it for their market garden. SEEDS' annual harvest dinner raises funds to help support these innovative gardens and guest celebrities have included Alice Waters and Michael Pollan.



Entrance to the SEEDS Garden

SEEDS has also helped start 10 more urban gardens around the city at senior centers, schools and city housing. "As long as there are at least four people interested in starting a garden in a location, we will come in to help," she says.

Brenda's latest project is to get Duke University more involved in gardening. She and a green dining committee helped establish two dining halls where local, chemical-free, seasonal food is offered and food scraps are composted. Brenda is also helping to develop a special program at the university called From Earth to Table.

At the end of the day, it all comes down to helping kids see the connection to the earth just as Brenda made that connection when she was a child. "It's sad to think that kids don't know where their food comes from," she says. "One child asked when the eggs would appear on the eggplant and when the carrots would be ready for 'take out'," says Brenda. The gardens are helping to promote a healthy lifestyle of eating good food, appreciating nature, and healing. "These experiences are something that will always be with them," says Brenda. Thanks to her efforts, thousands of children in Durham may include gardening as part of their own future.