



BLOOM WHERE YOU'RE PLANTED

Bright perennials beautify a busy urban gathering place. Leafy vegetables provide sustenance for underserved communities. In Durham County, Master Gardener volunteers are taking their expertise to the streets.

written by JAMEELA F. DALLIS

CHARTREUSE SWEET POTATO VINE and weeping rosemary spill over the edge of a low, rust-colored metal trough. Russian sage — whose small purple flowers painted at the ends of silvery green stalks could be mistaken for stick lavender — fills another container nearby. Large wooden planters are home to slender, gently swaying bamboo stalks. And from a long, low steel trough, cotton ball-like tufts of purple dance at the ends of stick verbena.

Deborah Pilkington looks right at home amid all this color, strolling through the garden, dressed in a periwinkle, teal, and violet patterned blouse. A 2015 graduate of the North Carolina State Extension Master Gardener program, Pilkington beams as she stops to name each plant that she passes.

This lively garden is not located in a suburban neighborhood or on a rural farm. It's on the patio of Cocoa Cinnamon, a coffee shop at the corner of West Geer and Foster streets in downtown

Durham, surrounded by the towering cranes and rebar of soon-to-be condos and apartments. In the midst of traffic cones and broken ground, Master Gardener volunteers like Pilkington are planting new seeds, both literally and figuratively, in unlikely green spaces like the one at this popular community gathering place.

Pilkington is one of nearly 100 Extension Master Gardener volunteers in Durham County alone. The group's purpose is to provide research-based gardening information to the public, a goal that aligns with the broader master gardener program's calling to help folks make environmentally sound decisions about our state's landscapes. The Durham County group, one of 88 statewide, serves both people and the plants that we love through education and environmental stewardship.

After a required 15 weeks of classes taught by experts in the field, Master Gardener volunteers graduate, receive certification, and commit to

Deborah Pilkington, an Extension Master Gardener volunteer in Durham County, manages the plants in the demonstration garden at Cocoa Cinnamon. She checks the fishpole bamboo for chill damage (above right) and tends to other perennials like prairie coneflower (opposite left) and rattlesnake master (above left).

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARY KNIERIM, ERIC WATERS

40 hours of volunteer work per year. That can mean traveling the county to answer questions at events, responding to phone and email queries, or taking on projects like the one at Cocoa Cinnamon. The volunteers don't do this work for the praise. "We do it because we love it," Pilkington says.

Her team — experienced Master Gardener volunteers that include a metal artist, a visual artist, and an irrigation specialist — envisions a series of oases amid all of the urban growth. For Cocoa Cinnamon, the group received \$1,000 in funding from an advisory committee plus a \$500 grant from the Master Gardener Association of North Carolina to teach container-gardening classes to area residents this spring.

"That's our mission as Master Gardener volunteers," Pilkington says — to pass along what they learn about gardening best practices to the people in their communities. And they're making a difference. The Cocoa Cinnamon project won third place in the Demonstration Garden category of the David Gibby International Master Gardener Search for Excellence Awards.

Red picotee and blue-veined petunias brighten a lush green backdrop of sweet potato vine and purple love grass next to the patio area at Cocoa Cinnamon.



TWO YEARS AGO, AFTER FINISHING HER WORKDAY in the garden at the NC Cooperative Extension office, Pilkington made her way across the street to Cocoa Cinnamon for a cup of coffee, as she often did. But this time, she glanced around the patio and noticed that the plant containers looked "just bereft," she says. Pilkington wrote a note to the owners on a Post-It: "Can we help you with your containers? Here's my phone number."

A week or two later, she got the call. Cocoa Cinnamon's Leon Grodski Barrera and Areli Barrera Grodski welcomed the offer. Leon told Pilkington that while the couple tried to keep their three coffee shop locations going through the pandemic, their plantings suffered. In 2013, Leon and Areli had helped breathe new life into this community by converting an old service station into the coffee shop. Now, as the world began to open up again, the promise of a new garden bursting with color and pollinators seemed like a great way to renew their commitment and welcome people back to the patio.

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Pilkington points to the bright green swaying Mexican feather grass, the lilac-hued Mexican petunias, the fiery orange-and-yellow Mexican marigolds, and the yellow-and-maroon prairie coneflower that was sourced from a nursery in Sanford. As her team began working on the garden, she says, they looked for ways to honor Areli's Mexican heritage with color and movement and texture. The joint goal for both the shop owners and Pilkington's team was for folks to be able to return to this space and "forget for a minute that they're downtown in a city."

At least 5,000 people move to the Triangle area each month, and with many of them living in the apartments and condos of downtown Durham, container gardens may be some residents' only gardening option. But the method is challenging. "In difficult urban settings, there's relentless sun, exposure, and wind. In the winter, it's so cold," Pilkington says. "There's construction. There's traffic." So in addition to helping businesses like Cocoa Cinnamon revitalize existing gardens, the Master Gardener volunteers also learn new

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARY KNIERIM



Among Dolores Chandler's tasks in the greenhouse at the Briggs Avenue Community Garden in East Durham is watering seedlings of cilantro, thyme, marjoram, and other herbs in preparation for the garden's spring plant sale, held in late April.

techniques regarding effective container-gardening practices and teach them to urban dwellers.

ON A FRIDAY MORNING, ABOUT THREE MILES SOUTH-west of Cocoa Cinnamon, Dolores Chandler is working in the garden behind Lakewood Elementary School. Started by Duke Alumni retirees, the vegetable garden includes a mix of perennials and annuals — lush rosemary with small purple flowers, bright yellow celosia, salvia sprinkled with red, and edible greens. Chandler learned about the opportunity to help nurture the garden through the Extension Master Gardener network.

“I’m perpetually amazed by what plants do — a tiny seed can become a watermelon!” Chandler says from beneath a bronze-colored ball cap with a pair of rainbow sunglasses resting on the brim. Chandler is a self-described lifelong student who’s “always interested in learning new things.”

Chandler had been curious about the Extension Master Gardener program for years, but with a 9-to-5 work schedule, becoming certified was a challenge. In late 2019, they moved in with their

spouse near the Briggs Avenue Community Garden, an Extension Master Gardener site in East Durham. After pandemic lockdowns began, Chandler decided to get involved. “The garden was one of the few places that we could go and feel safe,” Chandler says. When the world reopened and the Extension Master Gardener program invited people to apply for its new cohort in 2021, Chandler determined that the time was right.

Not everyone has to be “a total gardening nerd to participate in the work,” Chandler says, “because there are so many ways people can be engaged, from helping manage a social media account to talking to people at farmers markets.” To Chandler, the Durham County program offers a “space that can accommodate a lot of different ways of being in the world.” It also offers an opportunity to get underserved communities to participate in projects that bring people closer to the earth.

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With its committed volunteers, the Extension Master Gardener program is making a lasting impact in communities across Durham. The Cocoa Cinnamon project not only has helped introduce new knowledge about gardening in challenging environments, but it’s also increased native pollinators. “We’ve had monarchs and bees in this urban habitat,” Pilkington says. “That’s rewarding!” Since 2014, dedicated plots at the Briggs Avenue Community Garden have helped supply the Campus Harvest Food Pantry at nearby Durham Technical Community College. “There’s enough food in the world,” Chandler says. “There is no reason for anyone to be hungry.”

Chandler walks over to a cabbage plant that’s bigger than two human heads. It’s ready for harvest. Each of the rich green outer leaves is larger than Chandler’s hands. They cut the vegetable and offer it to a visitor to hold. It’s heavy. Reflecting on the miracle of how plants continue to grow despite hardships, Chandler says, “If that’s not life, I don’t know what is. Out of despair, life is still happening. And I’m participating.” **Os**

Jameela F. Dallis is a writer and scholar based in Durham.