

Gaia's Peace Garden Blooms as Model Urban Oasis

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Blair Frank

[Jeff Biggers](#), Contributor

Tucked away at the end of a residential cul-de-sac in Iowa City, just south of Interstate 80 and growing suburbs, the daffodils, violets and hyacinth in bloom, among the peach, pear, cherry and apple blossoms, Blair Frank tends to the medicinal herb section at the privately-owned Gaia's Peace Garden with the precision of an urban planner.

Far from being a "vacant lot," the eight-year-old Peace Garden initiative under Frank and his wife Mary Kirkpatrick's tutelage has emerged as a nationally acclaimed sustainability showcase for Iowa City, transforming 1.1 acres of clay soil into a biodiversity hot-spot, a permaculture demonstrate site, a local food and medicinal herb oasis, and a blueprint for city staff and planners on how to incorporate green spaces and commons into neighborhood development. A solar energy panel powers a pump on a small waterfall as a renewable energy demonstration site; a stone labyrinth guides visitors around the Garden sections, where benches and places have been set up for meditation.

"It's a demonstration of some of the most forward-thinking and ecologically sound land management practices available," said Jennifer Kardos, with the nonprofit Backyard Abundance.

“But more importantly, it is place infused with love where community members can gather and imagine a more peaceful way of being in the world. It has been a place of refuge and deep healing for me personally.”

Gaia’s Peace Garden has also become a beloved landmark for neighbors, offering a serene and safe place in the urban landscape to reconnect with nature, take a walk during lunch or quietly meet in the evenings.

“We love the garden,” said Claudia Sartini-Rideout, whose next-door property overlooks the Peace Garden. “Many of the neighbors often bring their kids there. It is a beautiful and peaceful place, and we are glad it is in our neighborhood. Blair and Mary are great neighbors!”

With more than 70 fruit trees, a berry and nut patch, an extensive vegetable garden, a medicinal herb garden, a nationally recognized monarch butterfly way-station of milkweed, nectar sources and shelter, Frank has worked with local groups and biodiversity experts to create the first botanical sanctuary recognized by the [United Plant Savers](#) in southeast Iowa.

“Gaia’s Peace Garden is about creating community while connecting to nature,” said Kyle Sieck, owner of the Local Burrito business that specializes in organic food. “It’s about creating habitat for critical species. Most importantly it’s about hope.”



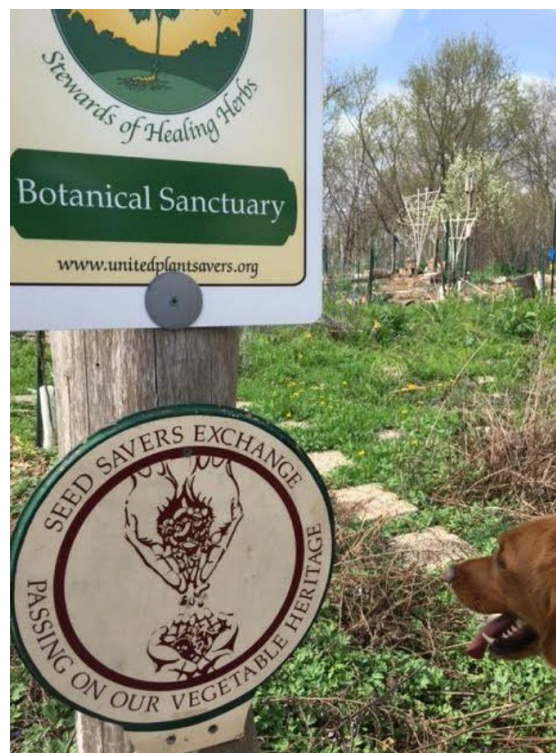
Gaia's Peace Garden

Inspired by his travels to the Findhorn Eco-Village in Scotland, Frank broke ground on the Peace Garden project as a place to bring together neighbors, celebrate the regenerative powers of

nature, herbs and food, along with public art, and demonstrate ways for city planners to recognize the importance of such green spaces in fostering community. A retired United Methodist minister and health worker, Frank has collaborated with local food and permaculture groups like Backyard Abundance, various colleges and universities, and Seed Savers Exchange in Decorah, Iowa, working to preserve and cultivate heirloom seeds.

Located on a forested edge near Shimek Elementary School, the Peace Garden also continues the legacy of Bohumil Shimek, the celebrated botanist and ecologist, who also pioneered a similarly private endeavor for a nature preserve with nationally renowned natural scientist Thomas Macbride, who served as the president of the University of Iowa.

“Our family visits the Peace garden regularly,” said Geoff Lauer, an Iowa City native whose children attend Shimek Elementary School, and oversaw the Iowa City Community School District’s Integrated Pest Management Committee. “Blair has created an organic, edible and medicinal *learning laboratory* in the midst of a suburban landscape. He nurtures an incredible range of color, fragrance and taste that is alive all year long. He does this by creating much more than an edible landscape, he has successfully woven his passions for healing and his spiritual practice into a sacred space. An hour in this peace garden is able to nourish the mind, body and soul.”



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