

"Not Just Passing Through" **A Profile on Emerging Community Gardens in the Eastside of Kalamazoo**

"Building gardens takes fences down," Tomme says slowly. He pauses after each word, as if he is in fact hammering down fence posts, one by one.

Tomme and his partner Dale first came to the corner of East Michigan Avenue and Foresman six years ago when blighted houses, too unsafe to live in, filled the street like rotten teeth in a smile. They chose to buy one of the many condemned houses, as cheap as the dirt it sat on, and fix it up themselves. Dale describes the house as scary, saying no one in their right mind would have bought it.

And maybe she's right. Their house, located in the east side of Kalamazoo, sits directly on a busy road where the speed limit is 30, but the cars drive well over that. As one of the main gateways to the city, the majority of people who use it are not living in Dale and Tomme's neighborhood. This, and the fact that they are only a block from the city's rickety train yard, gave their neighborhood the feel of a place to pass through, not to stay.

As it turns out, this was precisely the type of place Dale and Tomme were searching for. After working on their house for a year and a half, they managed to obtain an occupancy permit, allowing them to move in. While Dale says, laughing, "I don't think our house will ever be completed", they quickly expanded their renovation project to adjacent properties. Dale explains, by buying a condemned house and not having to hire contractors, they managed to own a beautiful home without taking out a mortgage. Now, they had the funds to cultivate a space for the community to gather, promote neighborhood rehabilitation, produce organic food, and overall, connect with nature. Today, there are now two gardens on either side of Dale and Tomme's renovated home, known as the Trybal Revival gardens.

"Part of the philosophy here," says Tomme, "is to get neighbors to know each other and to start working together." The first garden they started is a community garden where 20 raised beds are assigned to locals who want to garden there. Tomme says that each year they get more gardeners and try to restrict it to people from the neighborhood. Currently, there are a dozen people who use the land that was once uncultivated and choked with invasive species.

One of these gardeners is Reagan, a local businesswoman who lives down the street and comes to the garden to relax during her lunch breaks. She says that she has only met a few other gardeners, but hopes to meet more. Dale, who noticed gardeners coming at different times without meeting others, started what she calls, "social hour". She hopes more people will start gardening at this communal time and get to know each other. While she talks, a car honks loudly and as it passes, you can see the driver wave.

"And the other part of it," continues Tomme, "is eating local food and knowing where your food comes from. It doesn't come from the damn car window. It comes from Earth! You know?" Tomme is wearing a tan brimmed hat and jean shorts rolled halfway up his thighs. He has a long braid down his back, slightly obscuring a quote on his bright green tee shirt, "The future will be different if we make the present different. – Peter Maurin". The food the garden produces is

distributed to the gardeners, with excess going to the Eastside Neighborhood Association who dispense it to other neighbors for free.

As the Trybal Revival community garden grew, it gained the attention of other like-minded Kalamazoo residents. Catie Boring, Garden and Beautification Coordinator at the Land Bank, contacted Dale and Tomme and asked if they would like to expand their project to other blighted properties the Land Bank had recently purchased. Delighted, they accepted the offer.

Catie was working on starting a new coalition of community gardeners, called Common Ground. This project is a collaboration of the Kalamazoo County Land Bank, Michigan State University Extension, Fair Food Matters and the Kalamazoo Nature Center that provides resources for agricultural supplies as well as green education in the community. Once the dilapidated houses were bulldozed and the land cleared of invasive species, Catie planned on making the property next to Dale and Tomme the epicenter of the Common Ground project.

And she was successful. On Saturday, April 21st there was a "Very Open House" attended by over 100 people, announcing the completion of the Common Ground resource shed. Brand new trowels, canopies, a rototiller, lawn mowers and much more were now available for loan for the exchange of five hours of volunteer work in any community garden in Kalamazoo.

MSU Extension, Fair Food Matters and the Nature Conservancy have all previously run gardening and sustainable living educational programs in Kalamazoo, "We don't like to re-create the wheel," says Catie, "We let people who do things well, do them. We have resources. They have education. It's a good team". The shed she promoted now acts as a place where the tools for starting and maintaining a garden are all there, all that needs to be done now is to go out there and garden, a message Common Ground, Dale, and Tomme hope to promote.

The garden that surrounds the resource shed was planned and designed by Dale and Tomme as a permaculture garden. Tomme explained how even after the houses were cleared away, the space still had a lot of work that needed to be done. Volunteers from Volunteer Kalamazoo, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo College, The Peace House, and various local church groups diligently uprooted Norway Maple Trees, Box Elder, and endless tangles of honeysuckle bushes. Right now, the garden is still under construction with only a dozen of the 200 planned plants in the ground. "This is a long term plan," says Catie, "but there has been a huge improvement in one year."

In a neighborhood where renters are cycled quickly and houses fall into disrepair, a long-term plan is an attempt to make the place feel more like home, now and in the future. Dale hopes that people entering Kalamazoo via East Michigan Ave will notice the work Common Ground, Tomme and she have put into their property, "Rather than people associating the Eastside of Kalamazoo with all those blighted homes that look like hell, now it's like *wow*, look at all this green space and gardening. You know? A vibrant community." As if in response, another car slows down, honks, and waves.