

**W**alter Stelkovis travels from his West Haven home to lower Chapel Street just about every pleasant spring and summer day to check on his garden. For four years, he's made the trip — back and forth — to make sure his vegetables and flowers are doing okay, exchanging happy greetings with a few friends along the way.

It may seem backwards for a suburbanite to maintain an urban garden, but it's perfectly natural to Stelkovis. It's all natural — organic, actually.

Near the intersection of Chapel and Norton Streets sits an oasis. It is a community garden that, even in the spring, is blooming with color and bustling with activity. Perennials such as a weeping flowering wisteria and six-foot tall rosebushes serve as a barrier from the street. The urban fenced garden sat at 1592 Chapel Street for many years as an ugly blighted lot. It's safe to say it's found itself.

About five years ago, Stelkovis took a bus tour of downtown New Haven that showcased the city's parks and gardens.

"I immediately knew I wanted to join the community garden" he recalls. "We're in a condo with enough space for a garden, but we don't get enough sun." As it goes, he is now one of the garden's coordinators.

He maintains four plots at what's called the Chapelseed Garden — two vegetable and two flower plots.

"We have a nice cross-section of people and of plantings," he says. There are about 20 plots and two 30-square-foot community gardens.

"We assign a row or two to anyone who wants to plant and it's working out well," he says. "We must stay organic, though. The Land Trust gets for us manure and compost and we work from that. Nothing non-organic is allowed."

There are about 50 community gardens tucked away throughout the Elm City. They're supported by the New Haven Department of Parks, Recreation & Trees, the Community Foundation for Greater New Haven and the New Haven Land Trust.

Doreen Larson-Oboyski is project coordinator for the city's Parks Department and co-founded the Greenspace and Community Gardens Partnership Program. She says that whether people are growing vegetables as a community group or working as a community group planting trees and making their neighborhood look better,

the importance is community building.

"People in neighborhoods are working together to make changes and no matter what the outcome is, the more people you have working together, the more you can get done and the more change you will see," she says. "It pulls the population in our neighborhoods together for the common good."

And with gardening, there is "instant common good." You do the work and you see the results of your work right away with gardening.

"It makes people want to do more — it makes people see what their individual efforts can do," says Larson-Oboyski.

She remembers when the Chapelseed lot housed a huge blighted apartment building that needed to be torn down.

"People in the neighborhood didn't want another building, they wanted a community garden," Larson-Oboyski recalls. "It took them a few years to get the garden and the soil okay because it was a huge building. They now have a vineyard in the middle of the garden and are growing grapes. This may be our first community vineyard!"

"We can't supply them with everything they need, but we do get funding for the gardens," she says. The Land Trust provides some compost and wood chips and there are many met requests for fencing, water and tools.

"The Land Trust has is working with the kids at the Sound School — and are having classes at the Pardee Rose Garden area and they have started seeds for the community gardens — especially tomatoes. Many people do like to do their own seedlings — many ethnic groups have certain preferences and they may get seeds from Puerto Rico or even from the southern U.S. states," Larson-Oboyski says.

The Community Foundation for Greater New Haven estimates that 4,000 people are involved in the city's 50 community gardens. They come from all ages, all income levels and just about every ethnic background on earth. As diverse as they are, they have one commonality: they are passionate about seeing things grow from the earth.

Chris Randall, president of the New Haven Land Trust, became involved with the organization he now heads because he was a gardener in the William Street Garden.



