



Garden Conductor

Although Bruce Tammen has never owned a spot of land in the city, he hasn't let a little thing like that keep him from gardening.

Story By **Carolyn Ulrich** Photography By **Ron Capek**

When Bruce Tammen arrived here in the mid 1970s to become a University of Chicago graduate student, he was appalled. Where were the gardens, he wondered? Coming from a Minnesota farming family and a strong gardening background, he saw plenty of land in his Hyde Park neighborhood, but very few gardens. What a contrast to Europe where he had seen tidy, prolific allotment gardens on the outskirts of cities, even adjacent to Schiphol Airport outside Amsterdam.

His feelings spiraled downward to plain old grad student funk (not atypical for U. of C. students), but not being able to put his hands in the ground and grow something, anything, so went against nature. His nature.

Salvation came when he started channeling his inner guerrilla gardener. Not that he was one of those Londoner or New Yorker guerrilla gardeners who sneak in at night and start planting on vacant lots. But when, 12 years after landing in Chicago, he found himself in a rental apartment overlooking some fallow backyard land, he started wondering, why not a garden?

"The backyard was unused, untended," he recalls. "So my wife Esther Menn and I dug a small garden, which grew yearly until we moved out of the building six years later. Not exactly squatting, but it was not exactly sanctioned. We ran into some conflict with the other tenants, who were accustomed to using this untended back yard as a dog pen."

Tammen and Menn continued to start gardens as they moved around the neighborhood. One space was too shady for vegetables, but Tammen tried his hand at growing the wildflowers of his beloved north woods. Fellow tenants generally appreciated their efforts, as did the officials in charge of their apartments in faculty-staff housing, first at the University of Chicago and later at the University of Virginia when Menn was hired to teach Old Testament history there.

In Virginia, Tammen, by then a professional baritone soloist and conductor, led the university choir—and gardened up a storm. "It's so much easier to garden in Virginia than Chicago," he lamented

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PHOTO: KAIA TAMMEN

The Secret of Success with Yellow Ladyslipper Orchid

There are two types of native woodland ladyslippers—pink and yellow—neither of which should ever be dug from the wild. The pink is rare and hard to grow; the yellow easier. After a little fiddling and experimenting, Bruce Tammen now knows how to make a yellow ladyslipper happy.

"*Cypripedium parviflorum* var. *pubescens*—what we called yellow moccasin flowers back in Minnesota. I bought it mail order four years ago. Survived but did nothing, until I read more about it and placed a piece of limestone on the surface of the soil adjacent to it, where it could slowly dissolve and leach in.

"This did the trick. Not only did I have a blossom last spring, but two new plants! Most of the native orchids prefer an acid soil. These prefer alkaline and tend to grow on a limestone base. My mother had them in a rock garden at our home back in Minnesota, and I remember that the structure of her garden was limestone."

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Bruce Tammen's "squatter garden" extends approximately 150 feet between an alley and the Chicago six-flat where he lives on the third floor.

>> after the pair later returned Hyde Park so Menn could assume a professorship at the Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago (LSTC). Shortly after their return, Tammen founded a choir, the 60-voice Chicago Chorale, which in 2010 celebrated its 10th anniversary (www.chicagochorale.org).

Again living in a typical Chicago six-flat, this one belonging to LSTC, Tammen eyed the backyard and set to work. But what really grabbed his attention was the strip of unused land just outside the fence, perhaps 150 feet long and 4 or 5 feet wide, lying fallow in full sun no less. Could this be turned into a garden? Need one even ask?

"I now garden on both sides of the fence," explains Tammen. "Inside belongs to LSTC. I began to work it in autumn 2004. It was untended. I had to dig it, cut down and grub out the volunteer trees, etc. A year later, 2005, I began work outside the fence. Checked with LSTC

and found they did not own it, so I called the alderman's office for permission. They told me OK, but be prepared to be pushed out at a moment's notice—no promises or guarantees."

So Tammen took his chances. He began at the east end and worked his way west year by year. "The soil was terrible," he recalls. "I only had so much energy to dig out the trees, the rocks, the rebar, the concrete chunks, etc." Suffering from serious osteoarthritis (he has had four surgeries) didn't help—but neither did it deter him.

It wasn't long before Tammen was marveling at the bounty of his harvest. Tomatoes, onions, garlic, eggplant, sweet corn, rhubarb, salad greens, herbs, squash and several kinds of peppers. With full sun blasting down on that fence-line strip all day long, the plants were super happy campers—even in outrageously poor soil. The interspersed roses, lilies, phlox, daylilies, peonies and summer annuals

thrived too. Think of it as a Midwestern take on the grand herbaceous borders of fancy English show gardens.

From day one, of course, Tammen was intent on improving that bad soil. "To me, buying topsoil, mulch, fertilizer, all of that, is no fun, doesn't answer my needs," he asserts. "I want to enable the entire ecosystem. I use things others discard—grass clippings, leaves, horse manure from the police stables, compost—all the things which one knows actually go into building a soil *in situ* in the first place, along with worms, insects, birds, the whole package. I love bringing that back to life, enabling a positive environment in the midst of the degradation that is city life."

Love of the plants and love of the process have to come from somewhere. In Tammen's case, the influence is surely his family. "In retirement, my father's heritage really burst forth, and he gardened like mad. As did/do my three brothers. As



a group, we can barely keep our hands out of the dirt.”

But why? “I think we love the independence, the ‘power,’ the self-reliance, of knowing we can feed ourselves and our dependents [Tammen and Menn have four adopted children], that we can save a lot of money that way and grow many things that taste better than what we could buy in the store.”

He speaks also of liking the aesthetics, “the beauty of growing plants, of flowers,” and the feeling of “participation in history—natural history after all includes the human aspect, too.”

For Tammen, gardening is clearly no mere hobby but a way of life, something that will nourish him body and soul to the end of his life, no matter where. As he puts it, “I would want to explore the possibilities wherever I found myself—a desert, a beach, a forest. What grows there? How can I be a part of it? This is really fun for me.” 🍄



Tammen mixes ornamental plants with his vegetables and raspberries. Lilies, in particular, thrive.

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