

Three gardeners, seven traits

St. Henry gardening experts pass along their knowledge

BY CASEY UEBELHOR

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Once upon a time, nearly every yard had a garden. A bird's-eye view showed rectangles of tilled earth spread around town like legos on the living room floor. Neighbors spent evenings in a kind of suspended downward dog position, throwing weeds onto newspapers, passing watering cans back and forth, lugging gallons of colorful produce toward kitchens.

It was nothing to hear people comment, *wow, those tomatoes are really taking off, or nice looking lettuce, or even I've got to get my watering done!*

Everyone gardened. Everyone knew gardening. Everyone traded produce. It was neighborhood (and workplace) practice. Vegetable gardens were as much a given in landscaping as boxwoods, azaleas and roses. When someone purchased or built a new

home, there was one inevitable question from friends, *Where are you going to put the garden?*

For some folks, gardening is just a part of life, but these days, growing up in the country doesn't necessarily guarantee an education in the art of growing vegetables. For many — particularly those of the younger generation — vegetable gardening is an age-old skill they desperately want to learn.

With that in mind, this reporter set out in early July to visit three St. Henry gardeners. These experts raise produce less than three miles from one another, just north of the quiet hamlet. The goals were simple: tour the gardeners' crops, discuss their philosophy of craft, and hopefully, learn some of their time-tested secrets!

First, I visit Paul Henke and his traditional backyard garden of tomatoes (water-logged), corn (disappointing), cucumber (thriving!), squash and peppers, etc. His is the smallest of the experts' gardens, at roughly 30 x 55 feet.

Henke lives with his adult daughter, but it is clear that the garden is his own territory. It is also very clear that Paul is accustomed to being outdoors. He wears a thin, white t-shirt and light wash denim cut-offs. (Cotton threads dangle at his knees.) He's forgotten about the morning interview and is hard at work repainting an outdoor shed.

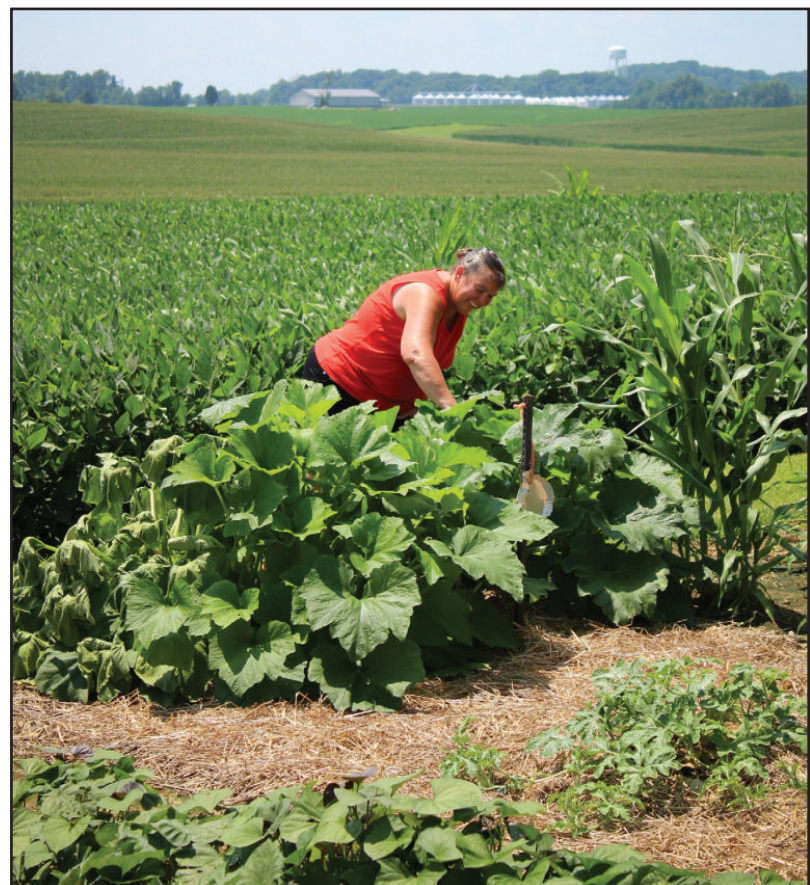
At nine in the morning (Thursday, July 5), it is already so unbearably hot and humid that I am thankful for the genetically modified corn that towers around Henke's yard like the walls of a fortress. We stand next to the stalks (shiny-green as plastic), sweating in their shade. Paul is full of morning energy, and the heat does not seem to phase him. I pretend it doesn't phase me either. It *does*. By the time we part company, I am desperate for the cool white walls and cushioned seat at my desk.

Next, in the hotter, more entrenched afternoon humidity, Jackie Wagner (par-

ents Bootsie and the late Charles Schwoeppe) and I tour her picturesque homestead. We shelter from the heat under the canopy of her backyard's well-established trees.

Wagner keeps two gardens. One, at 36 x 96 feet, is just for potatoes. The other, at 36 x 120 feet, contains an array of vegetables. Her arms are sun-kissed, and she wears an easy, tangerine-colored tank top with comfortable shorts.

Jackie's house is positioned among geometric rectangles made of rows of green stalks. Barns and silos are visible all around. On the edge of Wagner's property, twin blackberry arbors point westward, where train tracks hide amongst the corn. In fact, we watch the sooty tops of railcars squiggle



Jackie Wagner examines her summer squash.

photo by Casey Uebelhör

in the hot air, while a quaint, red and white plane swoops above them. The aircraft ducks behind a patch of forest, returns, sails back over the train and sprints across an army of yellow-headed crop. Herbicide fans out like

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Henke roams his cucumber patch, a few weeks prior to our interview.

photo by Jody Henke

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