

A CLOSER LOOK AT:

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Grosse Ile Gardens of Hope

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Westcroft Gardens has been in existence since 1776 and is the oldest farm in Michigan that is still owned and operated by the same family. Denise de Beausset, the current president of the business, now represents the 7th generation of her family to run the Grosse Ile farm. Although it has had many historical uses, its primary success has been as a horticultural facility where pivotal research once took place, including famous studies on growing azaleas and rhododendrons in northern climates. In later years, Westcroft Gardens has focused on sales of perennials, spring annuals, trees, and shrubs.



Bob and Mike Johnson are brothers who also have a family legacy in farming. Their father grew up on a family farm in Grosse Ile, but neither of the brothers pursued farming directly as a career option. Both retired now, Bob spent his career as a science educator. He has had a very active retirement as an advocate of agriculture and natural resource career technical education and has served as a member of the board of the directors for the Wayne County Farm Bureau and the Wayne County Conservation District. Mike spent forty-five years in the legal and business professions. He has been a longtime, enthusiastic volunteer for homeless initiatives, which has inspired him to develop new programs that can provide food and support for those in need.



During Bob's time teaching, he regularly partnered with Denise to use Westcroft Gardens as an educational opportunity for local students. When the Johnson brothers recently came up with the idea of creating a new local farm, they realized that they wanted to support the continuation of Westcroft Gardens, provide food for local people in need, and provide a working business model that would be available to the area's schools and educational institutions. As a result, Bob, Mike, and Denise partnered to create the plan for Grosse Ile Gardens of Hope, a multifaceted program that will use the facilities at Westcroft Gardens to host a summer farmer's market, demonstrate hoophouse gardening, be a center for cooperative growing, offer educational programming, and organize community recreational events.

In talking about the inspiration for their plan, Mike explained, "This is about providing good nutrition for the needy in Michigan through year-round growing. We see this as just the start of what should be a widespread model for governments and nonprofits to follow." Bob expanded on this from an educational viewpoint, noting that, "In education, students miss the whole peak growing season due to the regular cycle of the school year. Hoophouses offer a tremendous tool for gardening within the traditional school calendar year. From a business perspective, this also allows farms to have extended production, more efficient land use, and access to greater markets in an ecologically friendly way."

The Grosse Ile Gardens of Hope initiative received approval for cost-share support through the NRCS-EQIP and are planning to build their hoophouse in the summer of 2015. They expect to start operations in August. Mike positively reviewed the NRCS-EQIP program, saying, "We couldn't have done this without NRCS. They turned our idea into an opportunity."

As very active participants in the ongoing Detroit-Wayne County SHT Educational Initiative, both Mike and Bob have already obtained considerable training regarding hoophouse management and operations. Mike described his experience, "As a novice farmer, the workshops were essential to knowing what was going on. I feel that participating in the trainings should be a prerequisite for getting cost-share funding. We found the classes so useful." Bob agreed, saying that "We hope, just like we saw in the recent workshops, to be a demonstration for others in growing a wide variety of crops. Later, we plan to market crops so that we bring profitability back to the farm, while also providing donations to the community. We want people to see this working."

Each of these partners has a strong reason for doing this work. Denise explained that there have been big changes in the greenhouse industry, with a decline in ornamental plants balanced by a growth in home gardening. Westcroft Gardens has adapted to the needs of the community many times over its long history. She sees hoophouse farming as the next natural progression of their work and, more importantly, a continuation of the family's legacy in a new way. Bob's passion for education is a driving motivation for his work on this project. He sees Grosse Ile Gardens of Hope as a way to build a model for agriculture that can inspire local schools and students. He recognizes the crucial role that agriculture plays in Wayne County and feels that it is essential for students to gain a strong understanding of the field. Civic responsibility is a strong motivator for Mike. Building on his work with homeless initiatives, he is excited about this opportunity to engage volunteers in the farm's operations and to leverage that help to produce food that can help those in need.



This profile series is hosted by the Southeast Michigan RC&D Council, as part of their Detroit-Wayne County Seasonal High Tunnel Educational Initiative. Learn more at: <http://semircd.org/projects/hightunnels>. Funding for this initiative has been provided by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service. Since late 2009, NRCS has been leading a Seasonal High Tunnel (SHT) Initiative as a part of its Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP). The SHT Initiative brings financial and technical assistance to support installation and management of seasonal high tunnels or "hoophouses" in agricultural production. Both the NRCS and the SEMIRCD are equal opportunity providers and employers.

