

Once upon a hill: A Garden Story



IN GOOD SEASON

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PLANTERS OVERLOOK HAS BEEN THE HOME of Farmpark's vegetable gardens since 1990 but it didn't always look as it does now. Early gardens had to be built up out of the clay soil on the overlook with limited manpower and no running water. With only one John Deere Gator to service all of Farmpark, hauling compost, wood chips, tools and weeds was a challenge. Composting was done primitively with large piles of barn bedding (you had to seek out the older more composted sections to find the good stuff). Weeds and garden waste were piled in two long windrows and took for what seemed like forever to break down.

But we've come a long way. The isolated gardens were joined by the Plant Science Center building in 1992 allowing us to raise plants year-round and demonstrate growing hydroponically. We managed to grow many wonderful things, but visitors didn't always want to make the journey to the top of the hill, often because they didn't know what was there. In 1995, The Great Tomato Works helped make the hilltop a prime destination.

Although landscaping was still a bit sparse, there were herb gardens in front of the building and five themed gardens surrounding the hill, along with a small orchard, vineyard and small fruit area with strawberries, blueberries, raspberries and blackberries. Watering was still a chore and hundreds of feet of hose were hauled around the hilltop when Mother Nature wasn't forthcoming. In 1997, waterlines were installed with spigots at every garden and at the small fruit area.

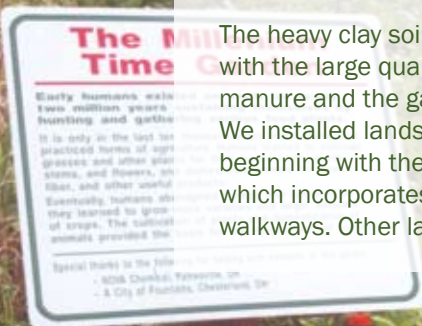
The heavy clay soils were constantly amended with the large quantity of available composted manure and the gardens kept growing. We installed landscapes into the gardens beginning with the Back Yard Kitchen garden, which incorporates perennials, arbors and walkways. Other landscape features added

to our gardens are Eagle Scout projects like the bridge between the Native American and Community gardens. Components brought back from our displays at the Cleveland Botanical Garden's shows, such as the old fashioned windmill and McGregor's Garden, have also been added to our gardens.

The renewable energy array exhibits have helped emphasize the role of solar energy in our lives and the lives of plants. A composting pad with a compost turner now creates finished compost in just 60 days—a vast improvement from the piles of slow-composting barn and garden waste. We now have some wonderful garden soils transformed from the pre-existing clay. Exhibit kiosks in the composting area and apiary areas have expanded the interpretation and we are working on others for our fruit and Christmas tree areas.

Over the years, many donated plants have helped expand our collections. Donated trees created our new orchard and the line of crabapples along the road up the hill. The community garden is the latest addition to our gardens. It provides some of our Farmpark members, who don't have room in their own yards, the opportunity to grow their own vegetables.

Each year has brought additions to the gardens and new challenge and surprises. Trying different plantings to see how they thrive has been a learning experience. Weather plays a big role in how our gardens grow: cool summers bring abundance of potatoes; hot summers are prime for tomatoes and peppers; too much rain or too little is detrimental. If you haven't made the trip to the hilltop, please do, and if you've visited before come see what's new—you're sure to be surprised.



1. The Plant Science Center soon after opening in 1992. 2. The Great Tomato Works exhibit under construction. 3. An early version of the Native American Garden. 4. The miniature Stonehenge in the Time Garden.

