

Brainerd area garden grows into destination for locals and tourists alike



Master Gardener Coralee Fox's Brainerd-area garden has become an attraction for locals and cabin-goers alike.

By [Nancy Ngo](#) Star Tribune

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It's a bit of a surprise that Coralee Fox created and maintains nearly 2 acres of gardens — complete with perennials, annuals and shrubs as well as walking paths, water features and a gazebo.

For Fox, who grew up on a farm in a family of 12, gardening was a way of life. One that she didn't much care for.

"We had a humongous garden. I hated to go out there and weed," she said. "For many years when I had my own home, I didn't garden. Then I slowly got into it again."

Fifteen years in the making, what started out as a small project has sprouted into a sprawling garden full of purpose.

There are several themed gardens — including ones dedicated to pollinators, fairies and edible, the latter which supplies local food shelves. The grounds have also morphed into a community gathering spot and educational tool.

Fox, an 80-year-old Crow Wing County Master Gardener, started her garden after purchasing the property in 2006.

At the time, "the entire four acres was just a field of meadow grass," she said.

At first, Fox only wanted to put in an island and a moat on the lowest spot of the property between two culverts to take advantage of a slope that could naturally supply water to raised beds. But, like many well intentioned small projects, it grew from there.

The Pond and Island now hosts a variety of plants that promote pollinators. Thanks to her efforts, Fox's property became a certified Monarch Waystation in July.

"It was a natural [stormwater runoff] spot. Most of the native plants ended up being put here," Fox said of the area filled with milkweed and nectar plants. "It gives the monarchs a place to be safe and rest during the long migration."

When Fox's daughter, Angela Busch, joined in, things expanded as the two added more gardens each year.

Near the Pond and Island is the Mauve Garden, a whimsical setting in which fairies, trolls and dwarf figurines appear amid purple- and pink-hued blooms such as coneflowers and monarda.

Then there's the Green Garden, the Fox family's vegetable garden, filled with beets, zucchini, carrots, tomatoes, leaf lettuce, eggplant, potatoes and squash for their personal consumption. There's also a garden for sharing.

The Annex Vegetable Garden, a partnership with the Crow Wing County Master Gardeners' Giving Gardens program, produces dozens of varieties of vegetables that are donated to the local community.

In addition to the four main gardens, Fox has several themed smaller gardens, including the Rose Garden, the White Garden, the Purple Garden and the Herb Garden.

A natural gathering spot

Fox plans her gardens so that there's always something in bloom. And since it would be a shame to not share the picture-perfect setting, she happily welcomes visitors.

While the land is private, the gardens have become a regular stop for dozens in the neighborhood. Countless Brainerd Lakes area tourists stroll through, as well.

Located along the pedestrian- and bike-friendly Carolyn Lane, near a main thoroughfare between Round Lake and North Long Lake and resorts, the gardens make for an ideal pit stop. First-time visitors often mistake the grounds for a public garden.

"Strangers who walk down think this is a community park. That's how we found this place," said local resident Jennifer Lee, who nominated Fox's garden for the Star Tribune Beautiful Gardens contest and who regularly stops by with her husband, Dan.

Neighbor Anna Haarstad and daughters Heidi, 7, and Hazel, 5, visit the gardens several times a week during the summer. Haarstad's daughters look for the fairies, each of which they've given a name and a back story.

"We came across this on one of our walks and have been coming here ever since," Haarstad said. "It's just magical that they can come here to explore and be adventurous."

Growing community

This year, the Fox family held two garden parties — one in early summer and one in early fall — for the community. They plan to make the gatherings an annual tradition.

"It draws the neighbors together to get to know each other," Fox said.

The garden also gives back in another way. To combat food scarcity amid the pandemic, Fox designated space for a vegetable garden that grows more than 500 pounds of produce each year for the Salvation Army.

Jennifer and Dan, along with other neighbors, volunteer by picking produce — strawberries, ground cherries, cucumbers, green beans, squash — for that giving garden.

"What's great is this has become a community garden that everyone can be a part of," Dan said.

Fox, an instructor for the Northland Arboretum youth gardening program, also uses her garden as an educational tool.

An area of her garden is designated a Walk-By site, a University of Minnesota Extension Master Gardener program that provides educational information on various plants.

And that's not all. Fox and her daughter are making raised garden beds so neighbors can join in the growing fun. Already, three families have reserved their beds for next spring.

Haarstad is one of them.

"We had been hoping to get more involved and start gardening, so this is perfect," she said.

For Fox, it's all in a growing season's work.

"Every year we like to change something and add something new," she said. "It keeps me active."









