

# Planted in history

## Chicagoans make marks on gardening

By Dennis Rodkin  
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**T**he elaborate and sumptuous exhibits at the Chicago Flower & Garden Show are testament to flower power—the deep and sometimes mystical urge to work with natural tools in creating a home-grown masterpiece. Chicago gardeners can thank the plants, the soil and their own talent for the results of their gardening efforts, but they might also invoke the names of a few noteworthy gardeners.

Several prominent figures have made important contributions to the way we garden while becoming famous in other realms. Among them are **Frank Lloyd Wright** and Mayor **Richard J. Daley**.

Wright, the visionary architect, elevated the flat and spare prairie landscape to a romantic and noble plane with his buildings. He encouraged the use of native plant materials to complement the native building style he pioneered.

Daley was well-known for his support of community gardening efforts, and WBBM-AM garden correspondent Virginia Beatty recalls fondly, "he always reminded people not to plant their tomatoes until after Decoration Day [now known as Memorial Day], no matter what—we simply don't have the weather for them before that. Anyone could tell gardeners that, but when Mayor Daley said it, they listened."

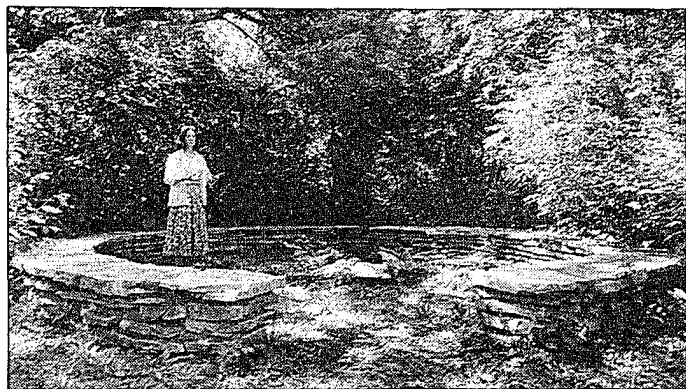
Then there are those whose careers in horticulture, landscaping or garden writing significantly advanced our knowledge of this region's growing possibilities or the nation's understanding of plants. What follows is an honor roll of some of the most significant contributors in Chicago garden history.

**George Ball** sold such gorgeous sweet peas, asters and calendulas at Chicago's wholesale flower market that his competitors kept asking him where he got his seeds. In 1905, he took the hint and started selling flower seeds. He packaged the first packets on his Glen Ellyn kitchen table.

The Geo. J. Ball Seed Co. took root and became nationally known for its flower and vegetable seeds—and is still going strong. Today, the company is headquartered in West Chicago, its top officers are George Ball's grandchildren, and the company also owns one of its former competitors, Burpee.

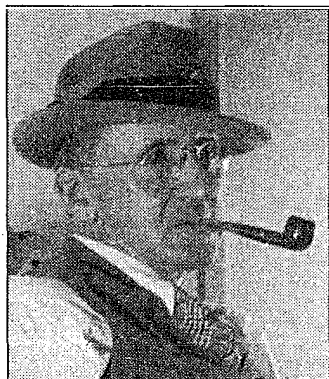
### Urban renewal

**Alfred Caldwell** believed strongly that people are not only inspired but also renewed by nature. In 1937, he trans-



Tribune file photo

Camille Lee, an Evanston resident and landscape architect, is shown in a 1983 photo standing in one of Jens Jensen's trademark "council rings."



**George J. Ball:** Packaged his first seed packets on his Glen Ellyn kitchen table.

formed the remnants of an old canal in Lincoln Park into a serene but dramatic hideaway known as the Lily Pool (now Lincoln Park Zoo's bird rookery).

Caldwell piled flat sheets of limestone atop one another to suggest the stratified bluffs of many Illinois rivers and planted the grounds with native trees, shrubs and wildflowers. The wild character of the place was a stark contrast to the built-up zoo to the south.

At the Lily Pool and in his landscapes at the Illinois Institute of Technology's campus on the near South Side, Caldwell demonstrated that it's not plant species and hardscape that make a garden design work, but an ability to recapture nature's beneficent powers in unnatural, architectural surroundings.

**Robert Douglas** made \$5,000 in the California Gold Rush of 1849 and returned to Waukegan, where he had lived since 1844, to invest his riches in researching his then-bold belief that sandy, useless soils might sustain timber trees. His R. Douglas Sons' Nursery became a nationally known innovator in evergreen and fruit tree development. Until he began growing evergreens from North American seeds, most evergreens planted in this country were shipped over from his native England.

Among the many plant varieties Douglas developed on his 65 acres in Waukegan are the Waukegan juniper and the Douglas arborvitae.

### Naturalistic ethic

**Jens Jensen** is the landscape world's counterpart to Frank Lloyd Wright. An ardent fan of native species, Jensen used native wildflowers, trees, shrubs—and even local stone—to dra-



Tribune photo by Bob Fila

**Alfred Caldwell** (in a 1990 photo) stands at the hideaway known as the Lily Pool (now Lincoln Park Zoo's bird rookery), which he designed and helped build.

matic effect in some of the fanciest estates of the North Shore and other parts of the Midwest.

Jensen designed Chicago's Columbus, Humboldt and Garfield Parks according to his naturalistic ethic. At the latter, he built the phenomenal Garfield Park Conservatory, where, in one bold stroke, he transformed the popular image of a public greenhouse from meticulously organized plant museum filled with potted plants on shelves into an indoor oasis of plants, light and water.

Jensen, who once said that "nature's lines are curves," preferred not to duplicate nature's own landscape designs but to enhance and interpret them with meandering paths, broad splashes of wildflower color and naturalistic transitions from densely planted forests to open savannas.

**Gertrude Kuh** helped soften the North Shore's postwar transition from a land of massive, baronial estates to a series of upscale suburbs with houses on smaller grounds. From the 1940s through the 1970s, she designed at least 60 gardens in Highland Park alone.

When the big landholdings were sliced up, the residents on the smaller parcels that resulted wanted the same feeling of escape and privacy that the estates' enormous grounds had provided for their owners.

Kuh frequently used the green-on-green color scheme and clusters of shrubs and trees to screen out the outside world—tricks that are still in use today.

She used few flowers but many sculptural specimen plants to give her clients the grand, oversized look they cherished and to keep maintenance needs low.