

Crain's Chicago Business  
Seeding a more accessible garden

When it opens on July 17, the Buehler Enabling Garden at the Chicago Botanic Garden in Glencoe will be filled with raised flowerbeds and hanging baskets on pulleys—two devices that make gardening easier for the elderly and people with disabilities.

The Buehler garden is one of a mere handful of enabling gardens around the country, says Geoffrey L. Rausch, partner at Environmental Planning & Design, the Pittsburgh firm that designed it.

“It makes a celebration of gardening for everyone,” Mr. Rausch says.

The garden features beds anywhere from 6 to 42 inches above the ground, offering a comfortable working height for disabled gardeners and bringing fragrant plants closer to everyone's nose. Plus, the design of the raised beds adds visual interest.

The plants were chosen to make the garden appealing year-round, says Eugene A. Rothert, the Botanic Garden's manager of horticultural therapy services and manager of the Buehler garden, who uses a wheelchair as a result of a spinal injury more than 20 years ago.

Dwarf shrubs and low-maintenance conifers add structure to the garden, while ornamental grasses lend movement and sound. Paths are lined with fragrant, brightly colored flowers.

Several plants yield fruits and flowers that visiting groups could use in classes at the garden, Mr. Rothert says. For instance, flower heads and ornamental grasses can be used to make dried-flower arrangements, and the herbs, tomatoes, onions and peppers in the vegetable patch might find their way into a salsa.

For those interested in techniques to make gardening easier, there is a wall of purple and green lettuces, built so the plants grow out of the wall, perpendicular to the ground. The plants, anywhere from three to five feet above the ground, can be easily tended by a gardener in a wheelchair, says Susan Brogdon, vice president for programs at the Botanic Garden.

In addition, two “touch carts” will be on hand, one displaying adaptable tools with lightweight handles, padding, wrist guards and other accessories. And a garden fact sheet will be available in large print, raised print, on tape and on video. The garden and restrooms near it are handicapped accessible, and tables in the garden are designed for wheelchairs to roll under them.

The 11,000 square foot garden replaces a 3,500 square foot enabling garden that opened in 1975, but had become obsolete. Two years in the making, the new, \$4 million garden was financed largely by the Buehler Family Foundation of Chicago. Additional funds came from former Gov. Jim Edgar's museum grant and the Grant Healthcare Foundation.