

## **A Legacy of Cultivation: Carolyn Vellar's Journey from Community Organizer to Master Gardener President**

Carolyn Vellar's path to becoming the president of the Platte County Master Gardeners chapter is a story of roots, both personal and professional. It's a journey shaped by a childhood filled with rich history and a mother's unique passion for fishing, all of which ultimately led her to a life of cultivating both plants and community.

Born in Norfolk, Virginia, Carolyn moved to Independence, Missouri, in the third grade. She grew up in a lovely older neighborhood, where her childhood was a masterclass in unconventional gardening. While her mother did grow flowers and tomatoes, her main crop was worms, which she cultivated in the ground with coffee grounds and other materials for her true passion: fishing. This early exposure to the earth instilled in Carolyn a love for nature that she has carried throughout her life. The tradition continues today, as she and her husband have passed on their gardening skills to their own children, who in turn are teaching their kids. Carolyn reflects on this legacy with pride, noting that her hope is for this tradition to continue, and for her grandkids to teach their kids about the joy of gardening. One of her granddaughters, an 11-year-old, even has her own 10x30 garden where she's growing tomatoes and flowers, a testament to the family's shared passion.

Her childhood chores, she recalls, were deeply tied to the yard and garden. She remembers a time before modern conveniences, when mowing the lawn was a much more physical task. "That was before power mowers," she notes, describing the tedious process of using a rotating, non-motorized mower, pushing it back and forth a hundred times just to get the grass clipped. This early experience with hard, hands-on work in the yard helped lay the groundwork for her dedication to the physical labor of gardening.

Her father, a remarkable figure in his own right, was a major influence on Carolyn's upbringing. A published author and a noted historian, he was the first curator of the Truman Library and also served as the historic sites director for Clay County, Missouri, overseeing iconic locations like the Jesse James Farm. His position at the Truman Library provided Carolyn with a unique opportunity: she was able to meet politicians and other famous people who visited the historic site. She even had the unforgettable experience of meeting President Truman and sitting on his lap. Her father's deep love for history, which he passed on to his daughters, fostered a lifelong appreciation for the past and the people who shaped it. This unique background provided Carolyn with a foundation of community engagement and a respect for heritage that would later define her career.

While she doesn't recall gardening being a focus in school, Carolyn does remember a major cultural shift that brought gardening to the forefront of people's minds. She credits the hippies of the 1960s with making it more popular. "They were really encouraging people to grow their own vegetables," she explains, noting the rise of communes and the increased emphasis on fresh, chemical-free food. This cultural movement helped set the stage for a new generation to embrace gardening with purpose. For Carolyn, who is a vegetarian, this focus on fresh produce and clean eating has always resonated deeply.

After having her children, Carolyn went back to college and earned a degree in Psychology from Park University. This pursuit of knowledge and her interest in human behavior laid the groundwork for her career as a community organizer in Kansas City North. She worked with older neighborhoods, helping people build relationships with their neighbors and advocate for positive change. She served on the Kansas City Charter Commission under Mayor Kay Barnes, and she was also part of a focus group that helped neighborhoods in different areas of the city define their future. This work, she says, was the perfect preparation for her current role. "It's not difficult to figure out that you have to build relationships to build anything," she explained, a philosophy she now applies to her work with the Master Gardeners. This philosophy is also evident in her personal life, as she and her husband now spend their days watching their granddaughter, Viviana, prioritizing this time as it is valuable and important to them.

Carolyn's dedication to building relationships is evident in her ambitious goals for the Platte County chapter. She is proud of the chapter's growth, which has expanded from a mere three members to 30 in the last year and a half. Her vision extends beyond just growing membership; she aims to foster a strong sense of community among the gardeners themselves. This summer, she is organizing a series of "garden tours" where members can visit each other's gardens. This initiative is designed to build relationships and allow members to share ideas and learn from one another in a casual, supportive environment. Carolyn's own gardening philosophy has also evolved. While she admits that early in her life "chemicals are still popular," she now says, "I don't use chemicals at all," demonstrating her commitment to a more natural approach. She believes this focus on social connection and shared knowledge is what will help the chapter continue to thrive.

As a Master Gardener, Carolyn has found a way to merge her passions for history, community, and plants. Her favorite volunteer projects include caring for the gardens at the Truman home in Independence and the historic Atkins-Johnson Farm in Gladstone. She finds it particularly touching that the Truman home's garden is maintained exactly as it was when the Trumans lived there, a testament to a rich and preserved history. When asked what she wished people knew about gardening, her answer was simple and empowering: "You just have

to try. You don't have to know everything. Just get your hands dirty and learn as you go."