

# Memphis Flyer

NEWS » COVER FEATURE

April 15, 2010

## Green Thumbs Up!

Environmental activism grows up — and is spreading like kudzu over Shelby County.

by FLYER STAFF



April 22, 1970, marked the first official "Earth Day," envisioned originally as a means of inspiring awareness of and appreciation for the environment. Forty years later, Earth Day organizers want it to be "a turning point to advance climate policy, energy efficiency, renewable energy, and green jobs."

In Memphis, as elsewhere in the country, Earth Day is now seen by environmental groups as a chance to highlight ways to live more gently on the planet and to promote conscious "green" behavior, individually and through various organizations.

We wondered how "green" Memphis really was and put out a call through various social media for suggestions as to what kinds of environmentally friendly activities were happening in our community. The short answer: We were overwhelmed with ideas and truly impressed with the variety of good "green" stuff going on hereabouts. What follows is merely a sampling of what we're calling "Green Thumbs Up." — *Bruce VanWyngarden*

### Digging It

Though their hard work sometimes goes unnoticed, every year the Memphis Division of Park Services, working in conjunction with the City Beautiful Commission, plants more than 10,000 flowers along the streets of our city.

Richard Beckwith, a Park Services horticulturist since 1986, is responsible for most of this work. "We like to focus on high-profile and high-traffic areas," he says, "so the plantings get the most

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A kayaker plows through a polluted Mississippi.



visibility and people get the most enjoyment from our work." Some of the most prominent flowerbeds can be found at the entrance to Overton Park, Church Park, the Pink Palace, and Cancer Survivor's Park.

And it's not just flowers. Beckwith's crews also plant trees, such as the new row of sugar maples at Highland and Poplar. Other popular trees — because they are hardy and fast-growing — include tulip poplars and nuttall oaks.

The most prominent example of this beautification program is the huge floral "M" in the median of East Parkway at Madison. Begun in the early 1970s and modeled after the stylized "M" that was the city's logo at the time, that project involves more than 4,000 flowers. Changed twice a year, it usually incorporates pansies in the winter and petunias, periwinkles, and lantana in the summer. — *Michael Finger*

### **Cash for Tires**

There are some political dividends, too, but City Council chairman Harold Collins and Shelby County commissioner Steve Mulroy still did a good deed for the local environment when they hatched and steered through their respective legislative bodies a "cash for tires" program, under which citizens were invited to round up tires from illegal dump sites or gather their own used and useless ones and take them to Mac Tire on Elvis Presley Boulevard for proper disposal.

The bounty was \$1 per tire, paid via check by mail. The council and commission each authorized two separate payouts of \$100,000 each — one outlay in December, another in March. Word is that the practice will become an annual one and, to that end, will find its way into both the council and commission budgets for the next fiscal year. — *Jackson Baker*

### **A Green Kroc**

The Salvation Army's Kroc Center of Memphis is under construction on 15 acres at the Mid-South Fairgrounds. The 100,000-square-foot, \$25 million facility aims to be a hub for arts, education, recreation, and worship in Memphis. If everything goes as planned, the multipurpose facility, which includes a gym, fitness center, splash park, and multiple athletic fields, will also be a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified model of architectural sustainability.

Chief Operating Officer Stephen Carpenter dispels the myth that green construction is more expensive than traditional methods. "A lot of times it's actually cheaper," Carpenter says, explaining how much energy was saved in the design process by moving his facility's pool to a position where Southern exposure will maximize the use of natural light. "A lot of times, people get ideas about the way things work," Carpenter says. "But when you sit down with the experts, they'll tell you it's just not true. For example, our HVAC may cost more on the front end, but it uses less energy and should last longer."

Building materials for the Kroc Center are being purchased regionally when possible to minimize the amount of energy used in transportation. Concrete from two municipal pools has been pulverized to make new concrete. Special paint has been chosen to eliminate the slow release of toxic fumes, motion sensors will ensure that the lights are turned off when the last person leaves a room, and a series of cisterns will collect rainwater for irrigating the Kroc Center's two athletic fields and courtyard. — *Chris Davis*

### **Plough Boulevard beautification**

This \$3 million project aims to spruce (or cypress and maple) up the area near Memphis International Airport with more than 2,000 trees.

Now in its initial phase, roughly 300 trees are being planted. Later phases of the project include wild-flower seeding and a Nonconnah greenway from Nonconnah Boulevard to Nash-Buckingham Park.

"Essentially what you have now is a treeless, featureless roadway that is very unattractive," landscape architect Ritchie Smith said last summer. "We felt like trees would make more of a [memphisflyer.com/gyrobase/.../Content...](http://memphisflyer.com/gyrobase/.../Content...)

difference on that road than any other element." — *Mary Cashiola*

### **CPOP**

The group Citizens to Preserve Overton Park (CPOP) works tirelessly to promote the city's largest urban park. Much of the publicity for the group has come from its ongoing battles with the Memphis Zoo over the zoo's encroachment on the Old Forest. But CPOP volunteers also offer nature walks every other weekend and hold periodic clean-ups and other events in pursuit of their stated goal: "To preserve and defend the Old Forest of Overton Park for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations."

The group is now pushing to have the Old Forest section of the park designated as a Tennessee state natural area. For more information, check out their website: [overtonparkforever.org](http://overtonparkforever.org). — *Bruce VanWyngarden*

### **To The Curb!**

"Curbing occurs most of the time. I do it. Many people do it," says Bill Dickerson, owner of Memphis ReUseIt.

As part of national Curb Day, Dickerson is urging residents across the city to put unwanted household items out on the curb for other Memphians to take and reuse. Started in New York City, Curb Day takes place in cities across the country on May 15th.

"People throw stuff out all the time, but this coordinates it a bit. It basically creates a large database of people who have things to reuse," Dickerson says.

Memphis ReUseIt, Dickerson's online recycling group, has 13,000 members who post and give away items for free. The group doesn't require items to be in perfect working condition.

The same spirit applies to Curb Day, which Dickerson hopes will make more citizens conscious of the way they dispose of their possessions. "Our main goal," he says, "is keeping things out of the landfill." — *Halley Johnson*

### **Community Gardens**

When the grid goes down, will you know how to grow food? If your answer is no (and it probably is) then it might be time to investigate community gardens, which are popping up in schools, church yards, and empty city lots from downtown to Collierville.

"Community gardens come in all shapes and sizes," says Sue Easley with Downing Hollow Farm, who is directing a handful of novice gardeners in a backyard vegetable garden near the University of Memphis. "We call this our city farm, and our gardeners work for shares of produce."

Like Easley, most community participants see shared gardens as a way to preserve green space, foster self-reliance, and encourage healthy eating. For more information, contact the Mid-South Peace and Justice Center's Grow Memphis, a group dedicated to developing community gardens in diverse neighborhoods throughout the city. — *Pamela Denney*

### **Signs of Progress**

Germantown long ago took aim at garish, oversized, and, yes, environmentally dubious commercial signs. You won't be able to recognize some famous, established vendors from the way they have to signal their presence in Memphis' suburban neighbor to the east.

Among the kinds of displays banned are: "pictures of human figures, animals, or food" (no steaming burgers or smiling oinkers, in other words); "signs which advertise an activity, business, product, or service not conducted on the premises"; "signs which have any moving parts"; "changing signs"; billboards; "banners, pennants, ribboned balloons, streamers, strings of lights, spinners, etc."; "interior lighted translucent signs"; "pulsating lights or strobe lights"; exposed bulbs; exposed neon.

Germantown isn't Memphis, but there's no reason Memphis can't begin to take steps to reduce the signs that blight our roadways. — *Jackson Baker*

### **Project Green Fork**

In 2008, Margot McNeeley asked herself how she could change the amount of waste and pollution in the restaurant industry, and Project Green Fork was born. The only locally operated organization of its kind, Project Green Fork works to make restaurants more environmentally friendly without busting any chops. ("I don't want to be the green police," McNeeley says.)

Instead, she prefers that restaurateurs apply for certification, fully committed to the idea of going green. From there, she visits the restaurant to draw up a status report and takes owners and employees through the six-step program to get Project Green Fork-certified. Replacing Styrofoam containers with sustainable products, composting in the kitchen, completing an MLGW energy audit, and recycling are some of the ways to pass muster. And as an added boost to the local economy, Project Green Fork partners with a local recycling business, Get Green, to coordinate pick-up at restaurants.

There are 16 certified restaurants in Memphis, and while the goal is to get 12 a year, McNeeley wants to focus on local restaurants only. "I'm not interested in chains," she says, "Someone else can do that." — *Hannah Sayle*

### **Blue and Gray = Green**

If a university campus is a microcosm of the community, Memphis would do well to follow the example set by the University of Memphis. The U of M recently kicked off its "Green Initiative" to make the entire school more energy efficient.

Some of the program's components didn't take much effort: adding recycling bins for paper and batteries, using more recycled paper, and going online with the faculty and staff publication *This Week*. Older buildings on the main campus were renovated and retrofitted with better insulation, more efficient heating and air conditioning systems, and low-energy LED lights. And this fall, a \$26 million women's dormitory opened on Patterson, replacing the 70-year-old West Hall. It is one of the few buildings in the state to meet the LEED Silver Standards in terms of efficiency. Special features include the use of insulated concrete and a heating system that redistributes heat from areas of the building that aren't in use. — *Michael Finger*

### **Eating Locally**

In 2006, the Memphis Farmers Market settled into the Central Station Pavilion near South Main, and a movement to support locally grown and raised foods took form. In addition to offering local fruits, vegetables, and meats, the market offers an education.

"We're able to connect the producer to the consumer," says Maryanne Lessley, manager of the market, "and also educate the community on healthy foods — not just say, 'Eat your greens,' but ask, 'What kind of greens are you eating? Are they from your community?'"

Local chefs also support the market, shopping for their menus and encouraging farmers to stretch their imaginations to grow new foods. The market itself sponsors monthly Farm-to-Fork dinners at restaurants like Felicia Suzanne's, Grill 83, and Andrew Michael Italian Kitchen. Not only has the downtown farmers market jumpstarted the local foods movement in Memphis, it has paved a way for other, similar markets in Collierville, Olive Branch, and the Memphis Botanic Garden. More markets are set to open this spring in Cooper-Young, Germantown, and Millington. — *Hannah Sayle*

### **Ozone Action Days**

The last few summers, the Memphis Area Transit Authority (MATA) has attempted to alleviate pollution with ozone action days. Under the program, MATA offers 25-cent rides on days when ozone emissions reach a certain level.

But we've always wondered about the logic of alerting people that it's an ozone action day on digital signs above I-240 ... where motorists are already driving to wherever they're going. —

*Mary Cashiola*

### **Greenways**

In early 2010, the Greater Memphis Greenline and the Wolf River Greenway — two separate pedestrian/bike paths that eventually will link up from downtown Memphis to Cordova — broke ground after years in concept and design phases. The first seven-mile stretch of the Greater Memphis Greenline, which will be constructed along the abandoned CSX rail line, will run from Tillman Street in Binghamton to Shelby Farms Park.

The Wolf River Greenway's initial construction phase loops around West Lake, a tributary of the Wolf near the corner of Humphreys Boulevard and Walnut Grove.

The Shelby Farms Park Conservancy is currently building a separate pedestrian bridge over the Wolf River that will link up with the first stretch of the Wolf River Greenway, allowing users safe access into the park. By the end of the summer, runners, walkers, and cyclists should be able to begin using both greenway systems.

— *Bianca Phillips*

### **Green Thumbs Down**

#### ***A Bad Sign***

The sign at the city's recycling drop-off centers reads:

"WARNING Anything left on the ground, jeopardizes the future of this collection effort."

Even ignoring the misplaced comma, this sign doesn't exactly say "Thanks for recycling" or "Keep up the good work." It basically says "Keep it clean, or we'll punish you by shutting down these centers."

Drop-off centers are used by people who live in apartments or private neighborhoods that don't have access to curbside recycling. Those users are already going out of their way to do their part for the environment.

The sign seems to suggest the city sees recycling as a privilege. It may not be a right, but when it's something that benefits the city both environmentally and economically, people should be treated like they're doing right.

— *Mary Cashiola*

### **Sewage in the River**

From January 2005 to September 2009, the city's Maynard C. Stiles Waste Treatment Plant on North Second Street reported 1,170 overflows in which a total of 23 million gallons of raw sewage leaked into city streets, yards, and the Mississippi River and its tributaries. In addition, a sewage line broke in April 2008 and leaked 45 million more gallons of sewage over a 25-day period.

The city-run waste treatment facility self-reported that information, as required by its Tennessee Department of Conservation permit. In February, the Environmental Protection Agency filed a lawsuit against the city of Memphis seeking injunctive relief and damages under terms of the federal Clean Water Act and the Tennessee Water Quality Control Act.

As a result, the city plans more aggressive cleaning procedures, increased industrial discharge surveillance, and expanded maintenance efforts at waste treatment plants. — *Bianca Phillips*

### **Easy Tips for Living a Little Greener**

- Eat less meat. A 2006 United Nations report found that the meat industry produces more greenhouse gases than all the SUVs, cars, planes, and ships in the world combined. Not only

does animal agriculture produce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, it's also the number-one source of methane emissions, according to the EPA. A simple solution? Reduce, or end, your meat consumption. If you must eat meat, purchase it from a local, family-owned farm.

- When packing your lunch, don't forget to include silverware. Sure, your salad is in a reusable container, but are you eating it with plastic disposable utensils? Fork that. You also can ditch plastic straws for reusable glass straws. They come with handy carrying cases for smoothies on the go.
- Switch to an aluminum water bottle. Plastic water bottles take up tons of room in landfills, and studies have shown that plastics can leach chemicals when they're re-used. A sturdy aluminum bottle can be used again and again. Not only do they come in all sorts of fun designs and colors, they keep beverages colder longer.
- Bring your own bags to the store. Old hat by now? Maybe. But with the world consuming a million plastic sacks each minute, we thought it was worth a reminder. Plus, when you bring your own bag to stores such as Target or Whole Foods, you get a few cents off. And every little penny helps, right?
- Carpool. Share a ride with a co-worker. You might make a new friend.
- Don't be afraid to be embarrassed at restaurants. While Project Green Fork restaurants use environmentally friendly to-go containers, other restaurants don't. It's okay to bring your own reusable container. Or ask for a piece of foil.
- If you're upgrading your home, look at earth-friendly options. Low-flow showerheads, tankless water heaters, low-E argon windows, and timed thermostats can save water, energy — and money.

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