



Nonprofit looks to build \$4.7M STEM center after completing educational garden

By [Aaron Gettinger](#) – Reporter, St. Louis Business Journal

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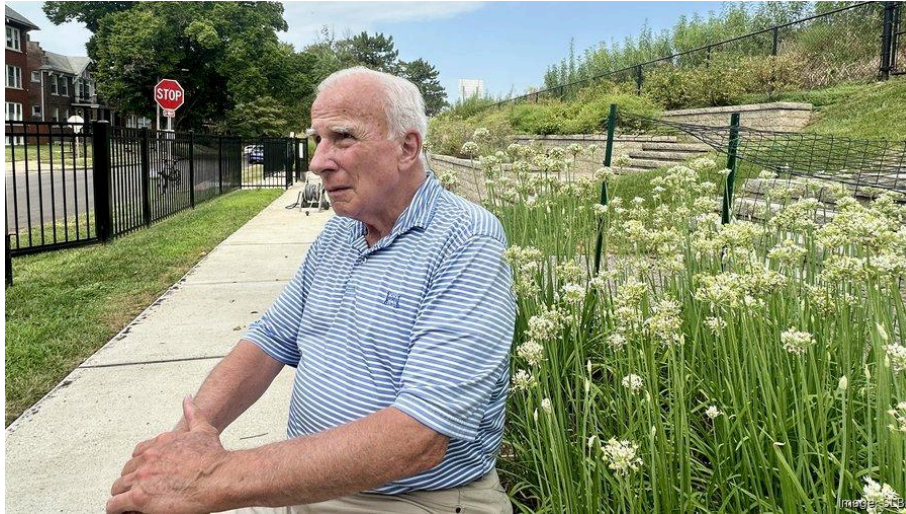
Eight years after its founding, with its 3.5-acre educational garden up and running in St. Louis' Shaw neighborhood, nonprofit Green House Venture is shifting focus toward building a \$4.7 million education center nearby.

In the meantime, the nonprofit continues to provide programming to students from four St. Louis elementary schools at the garden, built onto the Interstate 44 embankment on space leased from the Missouri Department of Transportation.

Green House Venture President Tom Purcell, who led the development of Laclede's Landing from 1976 to 2003, said he created the nonprofit organization to try to link students to plant science as a potential career, filling in education gaps at local elementary schools.

"I saw bioscience becoming a big deal here in this region with Cortex, Danforth and so forth," Purcell said of the Cortex innovation community and Donald Danforth Plant Science Center. "Then I saw agriculture taking a much more visible position. We have Bunge here now; they have major agricultural capability."

Purcell's organization focuses on urban agriculture, nutrition and dietetics, and bioscience through educational programming at four local schools: Mullanphy-Botanical Garden Investigative Learning Center, St. Margaret of Scotland School, Tower Grove Christian Academy and Lafayette Preparatory Academy, each chosen so as to include public, parochial, private and charter elementary schools.



Green House Venture President Tom Purcell at its Embankment Greenway and Terrace Garden between Interstate 44 and De Tonty Street in St. Louis' Shaw neighborhood.

Since 2016, Purcell said, Green House Venture has raised around \$940,000. Backers found a 3.5-acre stretch of land on De Tonty Street and turned it into the Embankment Greenway and Terrace Garden, a teeming-with-life tiered garden where flowers, vegetables and native plants grow. Caseyville commercial landscape company Focal Pointe was the contractor for the \$900,000 terrace garden, and Affton-based Native Landscape Solutions developed the garden's bee-pollinator habitat.

In June, volunteers picked and packaged 198 pounds of lettuce, radishes, kale, kohlrabi, chard and other vegetables, which Green House Venture then donated to charity. Students in the elementary programming also got to take home harvested produce to cook with their families. Kids work alongside adult volunteers to do the planting, growing and harvesting. Participants wear safety vests while working alongside the highway, which is separated from the terrace garden by guardrails.

"For MoDOT, the question was how do you use right-of-way on an embankment," Tom Blair, MoDOT's St. Louis district engineer, said in a statement. "This is a win-win situation for both Green House Venture and the State of Missouri because with this parcel of land along MoDOT right of way, we don't have to maintain the land, and in turn, children from the area can use the land to learn about agriculture and bioscience."

Plants closer to the roadway have root systems that extend up to 15 feet into the hillside, stabilizing the embankment and absorbing rain. Cold frame growth chambers continue growing during wintertime.

"We have a large biotech industry in this town," said Green House Venture spokesman Craig Workman. "Where's the next generation of plant scientists coming from? Do we have to recruit them from the coasts, or can we home-grow them here?"

He added, "Students don't pass tests and get school credit for doing this. This is something they want to do. Their parents support it."

Three out of the four participating schools do programming during the school day, with one after school. It has its own bus program for participants' transportation. Educational programming is offered at no charge as an extracurricular activity. Principals and teachers work with volunteer Green House Venture education coordinators to plan each semester's lesson plans. Programming sometimes happens over school hours, and schools handle admissions and participation.



Green House Venture plans to build a STEM center on land it owns at De Tonty and Lawrence streets.

The plan now is to build a 7,500-square-foot educational center with two or three classrooms and a greenhouse on property the nonprofit owns at 3966 De Tonty St. at Lawrence Street. It will enable Green House Venture to offer a community meeting space as well as educational programming expanded up to eighth graders; it currently serves fourth-through-sixth graders. Workman said Green House Venture has raised \$1.8 million so far to build the center.

Several local colleges and universities and organizations collaborate with Green House Venture on programming, sending speakers to give talks. Saint Louis University scientists teach students through the Pollinator Recovery Habitat program.

"We're using the existing infrastructure," Purcell said. "We're helping those teachers and the principals achieve their goals."

He said, "What we've learned is that kids are very interested in this whole thing; so are teachers. They don't have the facility to deal with it, so we're bringing them in and showing them."

As more regional schools open greenhouse facilities — [Lindbergh Schools is doing infrastructure work](#), Purcell said, as is the Pattonville School District — he hopes Green House Venture's concept can grow.

For its fiscal year ended June 30, 2023, Green House Venture reported total revenue of \$589,066 and total expenses of \$151,929, with total assets of nearly \$1.2 million, according to its most recent IRS filing.