



## An Acre of Paradise

**C**huck Levine's garden is literally a snowplow's spray away from the intersection of Lexington Avenue and Highway 36 in Roseville. It's a hidden space that slowly reveals the story of the passionate plantsman who created it.

Chuck broke ground 20 years ago on his pie-shaped acre, a plain blanket of turf on an inch of dirt covering the hard-packed soil where construction equipment was parked when the nearby highway was built. Through tireless soil amending, it has evolved into a labyrinth of green spaces harboring a menagerie of plants.

"This garden houses my life's collection of plant materials," says Chuck. "I have been growing plants since I was a child in Duluth. I was inspired greatly by my neighbors who were teachers and had the summer off and created beautiful gardens." In turn, Chuck now inspires young gardeners as he teaches urban agriculture in the Anoka-Hennepin school district.

### A Plant Preserve

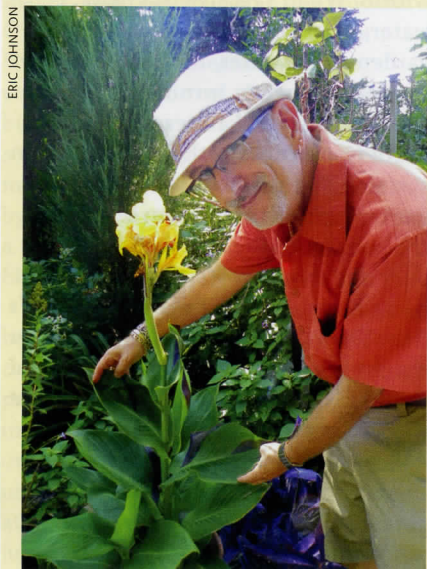
You can quickly, and blissfully, lose yourself in Chuck's garden. Every habitat is represented: shady glades, sunny borders, a rushing waterfall, rock gardens, a meadow, a prairie, a woodland, a sand pit, and a bog. "The garden was built as an escape and a sanctuary," he says. "I created my own little private universe here. This garden is meant to envelope you, so you become one with the garden."

Plant lovers can spend hours exploring as there are thousands of unusual varieties and species. "I wanted to have one of everything," Chuck says. Over time, he has focused on creating a panoramic garden picture. "You look at the garden and you can see all the colors, textures, shapes, and forms," he says. "It changes all the time. In the spring, you see the blooming bulbs and ephemerals, and then it goes onto the blooming cactus and iris. Then it's lily time." Hydrangeas and fall-blooming plants, such as black-eyed Susans, finish the show.

*Rudbeckia laciniata* 'Golden Glow', a double form of the native *Rudbeckia*, is one of the plants in Chuck's garden that has traveled with him throughout his life. A gift of seed from his then-landlady, Dora Brule, when he was a horticulture student at the University of Minnesota-Crookston, the plant goes back to Dora's mother's farm near Detroit Lakes in the 1800s. "People want plants that have a story," Chuck notes. "A few years ago, it was about the newest, the hottest, the biggest, the brightest, or the most variegated. Now, people are less interested in that. They want plants that are tried and true."

That said, Chuck holds a penchant for the tropical varieties that fill his garden. "The freeway sound that you are hearing is actually not cars, but waves and surf," he says with a grin, "because we are in a tropical paradise." When you look around, you can almost believe it. **19**

Minneapolis-based writer and designer Eric Johnson blogs at [gardendrama.com](http://gardendrama.com).



Avid plantsman Chuck Levine with *Canna x generalis* 'Cleopatra', one of the thousands of plants in his 1-acre garden.

### Chuck's Favorites

**Ginkgo biloba** 'Variegata'. "I love all the many exotic and unusual leaf forms and varieties of the ginkgo, but one variegated ginkgo leaf is enough to hypnotize me."

**Gardenia jasminoides**. "They make me think of my mother and her gift to me of the power of fragrance."

**Magnolia tripetala**. "The foliage alone would be enough but when you top each branch with a pure white jumbo blossom, you are taken back to another time."

**Malus** 'Molazam' Molten Lava®. "With its undulating waves of spreading branches and spring flowers followed by persistent orange apples, this tree creates its own world underneath, where the hostas grow."

**Anemonella thalictroides** 'Green Hurricane'. "This minute spring ephemeral is a delight to behold with its adorable, almost invisible blossoms. Like an emerald from the earth."

**Hosta** 'Hirao Majesty'. "This jumbo hosta with its glossy green foliage is topped off with the most amazing water lily-like flowers that take your breath away."

**Comfrey**. "The plant that just keeps on giving. Over the years, I have shared more comfrey root cuttings than any other plant in my garden. Pieces of it now grow in hundreds of gardens."

**American Yellow Wood** (*Cladrastis lutea*). "This magnificent tree blooms for just a brief period in late spring when it becomes weighed down with thousands of individual white pendulous flowers, like a huge tree wisteria." —E.J.