

Gaylord Mermaid (and Chief Gardener)
Eileen Brandt



Very Mary Garden

This yellow-themed garden features cosmos, lantana, columbine, and coneflowers.

Gaylord (population 2,279) is one of the many rural towns that dot Highway 5 as it winds its way through southern Minnesota.

Most of the travelers and truckers that pass through have no idea that just a few blocks northwest of the city's main intersection is the true heart of the town, the Gaylord Community Swimming Pool.

Built in the early 1960s, the pool is tucked inside the city park, not far from Lake Titloe and its two small islands. The pool house (home to the office, concession stand, and changing rooms) is surrounded by a wading pool, the main swimming pool—complete with a slide and diving boards—and several themed gardens that are the passion of the pool's director, chief swimming teacher, and head plant diva, Eileen Brandt.

For 27 summers, Eileen has been at the helm of the pool and its gardens. Known as the Gaylord Mermaid, Eileen's love of gardening has not only created a fun and pretty setting for children to learn to swim and parents to catch up on the local gossip, it has established the pool as a revered place that harbors community memories and values. The pool bubbles with activity on any nice day from the end of school until the last possible day in August. As a community gathering spot and a source of pride for the teens who plant and tend its gardens, it suffers almost no vandalism.

A Community of Support

Community involvement is evident everywhere. Families picnicking in the park venture to the gardens for photos. Locals donate their divided perennials. Gaylord native Steve Pitzner

Reflecting Pool

Story and photos by Eric Johnson

liked the flowers so much, he donated two cases of plant food. Dale Frauendienst hauls in black dirt whenever it's needed, and local "tree guy" Pauly Kloeckl, steadily supplies 3-inch-thick tree stump rounds for the staff to step on as they weed. Being one of the pool's gardeners is a coveted position among local teens. Bill and Edna Bauer taught Eileen how to overwinter geraniums. When they both died, all their beloved geraniums were given to the gardens.

Arriving at the pool, you are met by a parade of pink flamingoes, many adorned with garage sale finds the swimmers have picked up ("It's all about the kid's creativity," says Eileen). Stroll through the half-acre near the pool and you will discover about 50 lovingly cared for hanging baskets and a series of themed gardens, each with a story and a tribute.

The pond beside the bath house was one of Eileen's first creations. Years ago, she recruited three high school boys to dig a hole for her future pond, and these same young men are now bringing their children to lessons at the pool. Home to water lilies and about 60 koi, two of whom are named Ike and Ella after a devoted Gaylord couple, the pond is a teaching place.

"I tell the kids, anyone can learn to swim, just come and watch the fish," Eileen says. "When a child is crying in lessons, we'll say: 'If you work with me for a bit, we can go outside and

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Gardeners always believe in tomorrow. And they plan for it.

– Eileen Brandt, gardener

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A community garden and its passionate head gardener show how growing plants and having fun can bring a small town together.



Albie's Red, White, and Blue Garden

Named for the pool's longtime fix-it man, Albie's garden boasts colorful zinnias, daylilies, marigolds, sedum, and salvia.

Sarah Sunshine Rain Garden

Memorializing a young girl, this cheerful garden includes Sedum 'Matrona', bee balm, Joe-pye weed and native grasses.

feed the fish! It almost always works."

All around the pool are carefully tended memory gardens.

Very Mary Garden

Mary Webster was a good friend to many, including Eileen, and could often be found at the pool in her signature lemon-yellow swimsuit and matching shorts, along with her son, Dalton, and daughter, Whitley, and all of the children from her daycare center. After Mary died suddenly, the pool crew lovingly created the Very Mary Garden. At the heart of the design is Mary's favorite flower, yellow snapdragons, which are butterfly magnets.

Eileen uses the garden to teach kids about the Spicebush Swallowtails, Viceroy's, Monarchs, and Mourning Cloaks that come to visit.

One day, a few years after Mary died, Dalton had stopped by the pool for some ice cream. All of a sudden, he came running into the pool house. "I need a camera!" The staff always has one handy, and he ran back out to the garden named after his mom and snapped a picture. In one photo was a yellow swallowtail butterfly sitting on a lantana. "I just knew it was Mary," says Eileen. "I was able to say, 'Mary, we are all OK.'"

Sarah Sunshine Rain Garden

When the city installed rain gardens throughout the city park, Eileen and her gardeners adopted the garden that borders the pool—a sunny spot perfect for remembering one of the pool's favorite swimmers, Sarah Streisman.

Reflecting Pool

A hula hoop champion and natural swimmer, Sarah always arrived “in six shades of pink,” from her sunglasses to her flip-flops, Eileen recalls. Sarah was 5 when she died in an accident. The rain garden named for Sarah is thriving, under the close tending of the garden crew and with the blessing of the pink hula hoop and photo of Sarah that hangs above it.

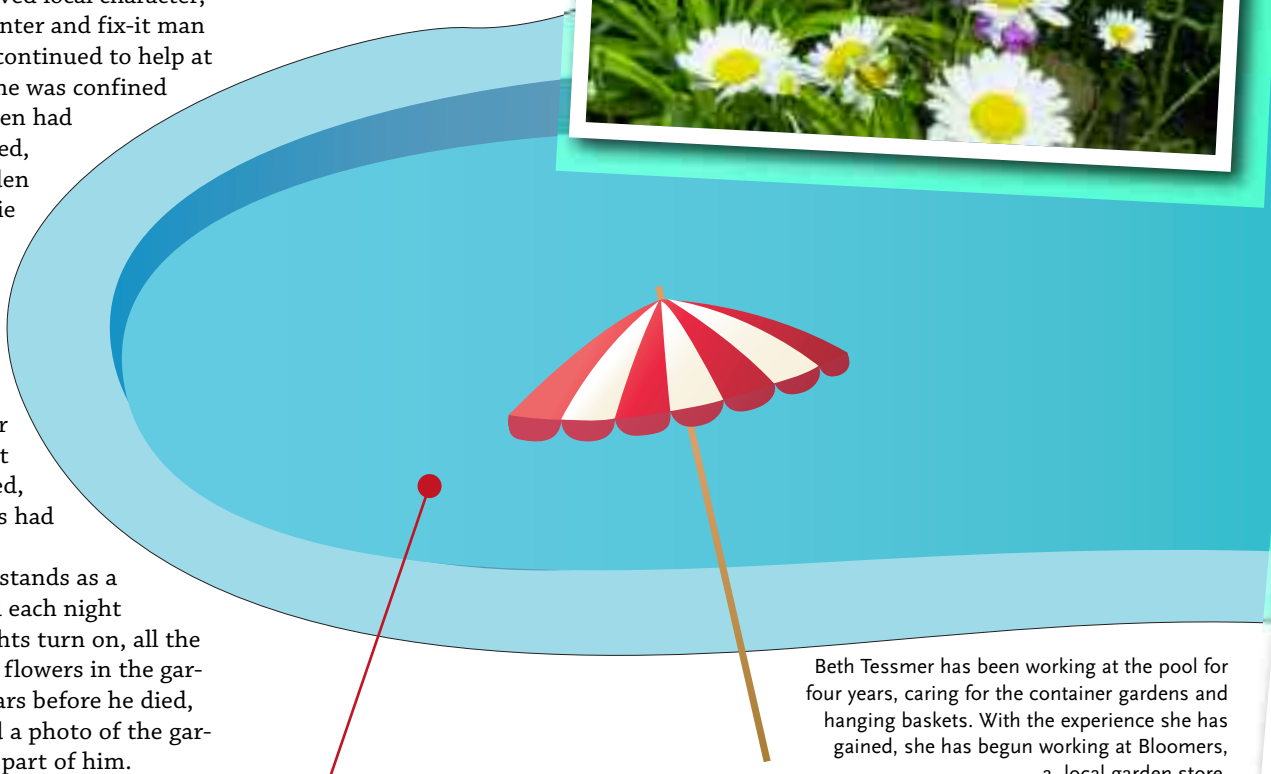
Albie's Red, White, and Blue Garden

Albie Kuphal, a beloved local character, was the pool's carpenter and fix-it man for many years. He continued to help at the pool even after he was confined to a wheelchair. Eileen had the idea to make a red, white, and blue garden and name it the Albie Garden. She let Albie know that plywood would be delivered to his garage workshop and that he was to create three stars for the garden. Albie got to work. Soon the red, white, and blue stars had lights.

Today the garden stands as a tribute to Albie, and each night when the garden lights turn on, all the red, white, and blue flowers in the garden light up. For years before he died, Albie carried around a photo of the garden that was such a part of him.

Hummer Garden

A native of Henderson, which is noted for its hummingbird festival, Eileen planted a garden to attract her favorite birds.



Beth Tessmer has been working at the pool for four years, caring for the container gardens and hanging baskets. With the experience she has gained, she has begun working at Bloomers, a local garden store.

60-foot Perennial Border

Working at the pool gardens is a favorite job for teens in Gaylord.

Helping weed the perennial border are, *from left*, Shane Guptill, Melissa Otto, Nicole Doering, Daniel Streeter, Lauren Otto.



Hummer Garden

Staying true to her roots, Eileen masterminded a hummingbird garden, created in the spirit of the Henderson Hummingbird Hurrah Celebration, held the last weekend in August in Eileen's hometown of Henderson. The garden includes a collection of rudbeckia, marigolds, veronica, coral bells, daisies, and zinnias, surrounding a large bird-bath. An old iron wheel adds a homey touch.

With its bright blooms, water source, and wealth of nectar, the garden attracts hummingbirds and pays homage to a hometown.



Shady Cow Garden

To honor Gaylord's own Princess Kay of the Milky Way, comical cows surround a garden of columbine, day lilies, coral bells, and impatiens.

announcements.

The biggest news of the summer was that plans were moving ahead for the Gaylord Community Swimming Pool to be completely redone by next year's opening day. Fueled by the spirit that has given such life to the pool for 44 years, the new facility will be renamed the Gaylord Area Aquatic Center.



The 60-foot Perennial Border


A 60-by-8-foot perennial border runs the length of the pool property. A small bridge (built by Albie Kuphal) crosses the border, and the Stephanie Jones angel pays tribute to a teenage swimmer who died in a traffic accident. The star of the perennial border is a patch of delphinium, affectionately reclassified by Eileen as the "Dietzer Delphinium."

Everyone in Gaylord knew and loved Wayne Dietz (Dietzer as he was known), a Gaylord native who taught math and coached at Woodbury High School. Wayne never forgot a face or a name and had a heart to match the size of his

football player's frame. When he died in 2008, delphiniums were in a bouquet at his funeral, and his mother, Marion, gave Eileen a pack of delphinium seeds for the border. They thrive as the focal point of the garden bed.

Shady Cow Garden and a Dairy Queen

The Shady Cow Garden honors Gaylord's own Kristi Pettis, the 1996 Princess Kay of the Milky Way. Complete with a milk can and pail, and a herd of cutout cows, the cow garden is the first that visitors see as they drive up to the pool, and this past season, a placard was added to display weekly

Life is short, summers are fleeting, and flowers fade quickly. But if you get your feet wet, soak up the sun, dig in, and bloom where you are planted, it's about the quality, not the quantity, of the time we spend on earth. And those we love live on in our memories and are as close as a butterfly or a blooming coneflower. These are lessons learned at the community swimming pool in Gaylord, Minn. 

Garden writer and designer Eric Johnson grew up just outside of Gaylord. He lives in Minneapolis and blogs at www.gardendra-ma.com.