



Gillespie Park Entrance in Summertime  
Photo Credit: City of Milwaukee

## Milwaukee's Vacant Lot Strategy: Creating Biophilic Green Spaces in Underserved Neighborhoods

By Erik Shambarger and Tim McCollow

Butterflies, honey bees, and the striking purple of Echinacea have returned to the corner of 14th and Wright in Milwaukee's Lindsay Heights central city neighborhood with the creation of Gillespie Park.

Since 2014, the City of Milwaukee has been restoring urban wildlife habitat by converting grassy, vacant lots into pocket parks, fruit orchards, farms and community gardens. These new green spaces have significantly increased insect and pollinator

populations as measured anecdotally before and after green space creation.

In 2012, Mayor Tom Barrett created the [HOME GR/OWN](#) initiative, managed by the City of Milwaukee's Environmental Collaboration Office (ECO) – HOME GR/OWN is just one of ECO's initiatives to make Milwaukee a world-class eco-city.

Milwaukee owns approximately 3,000 grass-covered vacant lots, with eighty percent in a small

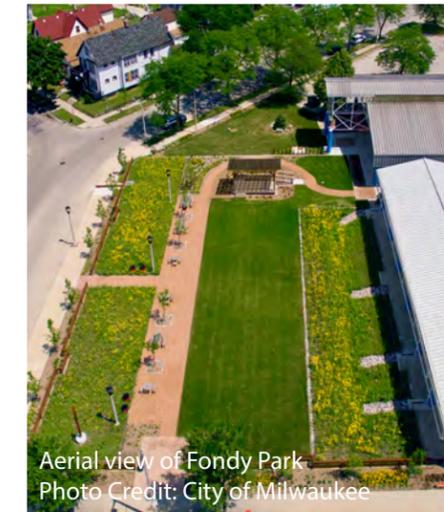
portion of our urban North Side. This area is economically challenged and underserved by Milwaukee County parks – as a result, little landscaping exists to support urban wildlife. The city's efforts to plant native perennials and trees has had a profound effect on urban wildlife, especially pollinators and birds. ECO and its partners are also creating additional opportunities for habitat through green infrastructure like bioswales and rain gardens in the neighborhood.

To date, HOME GR/OWN and its partners have converted over fifty vacant lots into thirty-two new green spaces that are intentionally clustered to create greater impact on neighborhood quality of life as well as create wildlife and pollinator corridors.

The initiative's latest and largest project is Fondy Park, sprouted from an idea in June 2016 with a grand opening in September 2017 – just fourteen months later. The site was a 3.5 acre vacant lot blighted for decades, surrounded by acres of concrete and bearing the legacy of a failed 2001 construction project. It is adjacent to the city's largest African American farmers market. After significant community input into park design and features, the project team of architects, stormwater engineers and landscapers focused on the site's attractiveness as a major green infrastructure installation to capture precipitation from the adjacent large farmers market's roofs.

Fondy Park's large bioswale captures 70,000 gallons of water

during a rain event. During construction, 1,300 potted native plants and nineteen trees were planted. The bioswale was seeded with wildflowers, grasses and sedges - designed for the mixture of dry and wet conditions. Though not a surprise, since we have seen it at other projects, bees and butterflies returned the day after the potted natives were planted!



Aerial view of Fondy Park  
Photo Credit: City of Milwaukee

A prairie that mirrors the bioswale was seeded with a shortgrass prairie mix. With few prairie plantings in the city, we wanted to provide residents with that quintessential Plains and Midwest biome.



Fondy Park Fence Flowers and Stage Blocks

Since 2018 was our first spring and summer at the new park, the project team was anxious to witness the native plantings' emergence. Spoiler alert: they flowered beautifully. The highlight was easily the thousands of Black-Eyed Susans we enjoyed in July. Today, thousands of native plants and animals flourish in the formerly blighted lot. With birds in the bioswale, numerous bee species swarming in the catmint, and butterflies across the entire site, Fondy Park embodies biophilic principles and residents have noticed. The Park serves as a one-stop STEM/sustainability outdoor classroom given it's biophilic, stormwater management and solar features and is now used for yoga classes, weekly music performances, large community gatherings and pollinator awareness classes.

ECO HOME GR/OWN's vacant lot conversions, such as Fondy Park, are restoring Milwaukee's natural environment, growing food, creating new neighborhood gathering spaces and helping our most vulnerable neighborhoods adapt to climate change.

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**Resource:**

*Environmental Collaboration Office (ECO). "HOME GR/OWN". City of Milwaukee. <https://city.milwaukee.gov/homegrown-milwaukee.com#.XF5N5KjwYuU>.*