

Garden Gurus Enhance the Beauty of St. Paul's Towers One Bloom at a Time

While excellent soil and plants may be important factors to the foundation of a beautiful garden, dedicated people are the foundation of a good garden committee. At St. Paul's Towers, a life plan senior living community in Oakland, a passionate and enthusiastic group of residents are the driving force in ensuring that the community's gardens are alive, vibrant and a place for residents to come together.



Barry Galvin shows off part of the Harris Garden at St. Paul's Towers.

When resident Barry Galvin arrived at St. Paul's Towers five years ago, the Garden Committee was in decline. He said the roof garden was struggling, the orchid collection was being cared for by a single maintenance person, and the Harris Garden "was very tired." But Barry saw the potential for improving all these gardens and was instrumental in expanding the committee to its now 18 members who have become the metaphorical sunshine, water and nutrients that have made St. Paul's Towers gardens thrive.

The Garden Committee is part of the St. Paul's Towers Resident Council. It is one of several committees that find ways to enhance community life and resident experience. The Garden Committee oversees and handles all aspects of the community's three gardens. The Harris Garden is a terrace garden that is named for an active 1990s resident, Dr. Robert Harris, a gardening enthusiast who was instrumental in adding more color to the garden.

"Our job is to select, plant, and maintain plants, flowers, and trees that are appropriate and aesthetically pleasing for each garden," Barry said. "We feed them, prune them and exchange plants as needed." Plantings are usually grouped by type for the best growing conditions. St. Paul's Towers employs a professional garden maintenance contractor to care for the perimeter gardens but committee members maintain the three inside gardens with some "heavy-lifting" support from the contractor.

Barry, whose career has included government service, corporate banking and running his own retail business, has always been interested in gardening and plants. He grew up in Southern California. His love of plants began when his next door neighbor, a former farmer, taught him about plants and

gardening. After retiring, Barry became very active in the San Francisco Botanical Garden, where he served as chairperson of its Docent Council and led many garden tours.

The Committee is comprised entirely of volunteers who donate their time, talent and resources. “Our members have varied interests in gardening,” Barry said. “We have people who like to design, people who like to plant, people who just like to admire the gardens’ beauty and all around plant lovers like me. We have one member we call ‘the chopper,’ because she loves pruning.”

Of the three gardens, the Harris Garden is perhaps the most diverse. It is divided into sub-gardens that include a shade garden, sun garden, ornamental garden and succulent corner. Barry estimates it consists of dozens of plant, flower and tree species, many donated by committee members. The popular space is a community hub for meetings and activities where residents enjoy the bursts of color.

The Committee’s newest project is improving and updating the Roof Garden, situated on top of the 23-story tower. It’s a container garden with spectacular views of Oakland and the San Francisco skyline.



St. Paul’s Towers Roof Top Garden overlooks Oakland and San Francisco.

Many residents like to use the rooftop as a walking path, finding it safe and a beautiful place to get in their walking routines. “The Resident Council supports our efforts to enhance and reinvigorate this premiere space,” Barry said. “This is our penthouse garden.”

“All of our gardens are marvelous,” said resident Henrietta Hirsch, who enjoys the Roof Garden during her daily walks. “Our volunteers do a great job in maintaining all of our gardens.”

Aside from maintaining the gardens, the Committee also organizes resident excursions to unique gardens around the Bay Area and hosts a Balcony Garden Tour of all the well-maintained balcony gardens at St. Paul’s Towers.

Many experts say gardening has many health benefits including reducing stress, encouraging outdoor activity and promoting social interaction.

“Like our gardens, we love to see the Garden Committee grow,” Barry said. “New members are always welcome.”