

Planting Pride, Transforming Communities with AIB

By Kristin Pategas

America in Bloom's collaborative national awards program has helped hundreds of communities realize their potential in becoming thriving places of work, play and living. Ironton, Ohio is just one of the many towns that have embraced America in Bloom principles and ideas to generate programs that provide the motivation and energy to plant pride in their community.

Ironton is a community that has experienced many economic setbacks throughout its history, from the 1970s with the closing of numerous industries due to the implementation of environmental standards, the exodus of jobs overseas, low employment and finally the city's fall into bankruptcy in 1982. Ironton, though, was true to its name and stood strong through these obstacles and used the promise of flowers to hearten its residents and create a symbol of rebirth. From its initial Downtown Clean-Up Days and spring plantings, Ironton discovered a path to raise spirits and rally support.

Kudos goes to sister America in Bloom community Gallipolis, OH for sharing with Ironton the guiding principles and resources of the America in Bloom program. Nine years ago Ironton in Bloom (IIB) planted the seed that has been nurtured by city government, businesses and residents to become the catalyst for new business growth, improved property values and a sense of pride. Ironton has seen its property values increase, derelict commercial properties redeveloped into thriving businesses, and the downtown beautified with hanging baskets, containers, decorative street furnishings and weed-free sidewalks. This transformation not only benefits businesses and home owners, but encourages Ironton to present its best to visitors, investors, potential residents and new businesses. Ironton has a number of future projects in the furnace: the Riverfront Park, a gateway for the new bridge over the Ohio River and the Iron Furnace Trail.





7th St. Community Garden



Ironton in Bloom Volunteers

Ironton in Bloom knew in order for their dreams of a transformed community to come true, they needed to develop programs that guaranteed success, from design to funding, implementation and on-going maintenance. Too often such beautification projects in the past failed due to lack of funds and maintenance strategies. Today, nine years after its inception, IIB has an annual \$50,000 budget for their floral displays supported by the city, local businesses, civic organizations and individuals. Members of IIB continue to work with the city to improve and expand Ironton's design standards to include floral and landscape requirements. They have also developed the OPT Program: Opportunity, Partnership and Teamwork, that recognizes sponsor donations and continued monetary support.



Much of the remaining open space within Ironton remains under environmental mitigation, but as these brownfields are cleaned, IIB, along with the city and other re-development agencies, have channeled revitalization efforts towards projects that benefit the community. Gateway Centre includes the city's first hotel, a family restaurant and space for a future brewery. Landscape enhancements include shade trees, floral displays, lighting, seating, bike racks and an interpretive display on the history of Ironton and the Ohio River.



Gateway Center Landscape

To create additional public spaces, in 2010 an America in Bloom judge recommended the creation of "pocket parks", transforming vacant residential lots into green spaces. Today, a number of these green respites have become important neighborhood centers, community gardens and connection hubs for healthy walking and biking trails.

Ironton has embraced its heritage by designating three residential historic districts and restoring two historic sites for reuse: the Ro-Na Theater and the Veterans Memorial Hall. Historic home owners and churches annually open for tours and the Lawrence County History Museum provides docents in period costume and character.





Lawrence County History Museum

Ironton in Bloom has developed an Annual Inventory Program where volunteers walk the city's streets each spring assessing cleanliness and maintenance needs including litter, weeds, sign maintenance, storm drain blockage and sidewalk repairs. These reports are passed on to the respective city departments to address as time and budget allow during the fiscal year.

Ironton is proof of the benefits of implementing America in Bloom's framework for improvements.



About the Author:



Kristin Pategas of Winter Park, FL is a certified Landscape Designer and horticulturist. Kristin and her husband, Stephen, are co-owners of Hortus Oasis, a boutique landscape architecture company and co-authors of the book *Southern Coastal Home Landscaping*. Together they write regular gardening columns for *Winter Park Home Magazine* and *The Park Press*.

Kristin's career began in 1982 when she joined the Walt Disney World Company as a plant pathologist at The Land, EPCOT. During her 18 years with Disney she also managed the Walt Disney World Nursery, developed educational programming for the Epcot International Flower & Garden Festival, and was a Program Manager for The Disney Institute. In 2001 she joined her husband to form Hortus Oasis; where they design residential, commercial and specialty gardens, trial new plants, practice sustainable gardening and donate their time and talents to the community.

Kristin currently serves on the educational committee for the Florida Nurserymen, Growers and Landscape Association (FNGLA), was the 2014 Local Committee Chair for the Association of Professional Landscape Designers (APLD) and helps organize the Autumn Mead Botanical Garden Plant Sale. Kristin can often be found with her husband tending the gardens at their 1925 home or teaching about landscape design at Harry P. Leu Gardens, the Winter Park Public Library, garden clubs and other groups in Central Florida. Kristin enjoys giving people the tools they need to create and maintain beautiful garden sanctuaries.

