

**Wonderland Gardens**  
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*After his sister Kelly was murdered, Sheldon Flemming was inspired to establish Wonderland Gardens, a combination tribute to his sister and an effort to unite the community. 'This is about getting involved. It's about being a part of and experiencing the environment in a favorable way,' he says.*

This is a place you'll have to see, a story you'll have to tell," says "Sherlock," an anonymous SGI member. Immediately, I contacted and visited with Sheldon Flemming, an SGI member and director and creator of Wonderland Gardens. Upon entering Wonderland and beginning my interview with Sheldon, I realized that Sherlock was on to something.

Many Buddhist terms such as *oneness of self and the environment* and *changing poison into medicine* flashed through my mind as he described the joys and struggles associated with his life and establishment of this place. It is as if the elements of life, nature and the entire universe somehow blended perfectly for a short time during my stay at Wonderland Gardens.

"This isn't just about landscaping," says Sheldon. "This is about the environment. About understanding where one fits in this big world. It's about getting in tune with nature."

Wonderland Gardens is a nonprofit entity supported by government funding and private grants. The 22-acre field, once a dairy farm, is now in the beginning stages of development. The garden has an array of fresh veggies, flowers, plants and trees. It is a place to experience the wholesomeness of nature without chemicals and pesticides. It is beautiful and serene, located in Atlanta's South DeKalb County.

One of the reasons Sheldon created the garden was to help young people develop an appreciation for the environment. He feels that violence and other harmful behavior exhibited in society are results of a lack of appreciation. Wonderland Gardens, he hopes, will become a part of the restoration process and provide meaningful information regarding the relationship between the self and the environment.

Sheldon moved to the Atlanta area from Columbus, Ohio, in 1977. He joined the SGI-USA in Atlanta in 1987. Born in Anchorage, Alaska, and with a background in landscaping, he has always had a natural connection to the environment. For six years he was the district horticultural manager for the City of Atlanta and prior to that operated a nursery. Not satisfied with having a secure, well-paying job, he left his position to incorporate landscaping and gardening skills into a place where the community and youth could interact with their natural environment. Wonderland Gardens was born.

"My sister Kelly Flemming was killed 11 years ago not even a mile from where Wonderland Gardens is situated," Sheldon says. "Her death is symbolic of being out of sync with your environment. Being out of sync with your environment can lead to destruction."

The police said that Kelly had been stabbed multiple times, tied up and left to die. She managed to break loose to seek help, but she died in an ambulance on the way to the hospital.

"I was a new member at the time it happened," Sheldon recalls. "At first I was devastated." He was encouraged to chant by Deborah, his girlfriend, who was not then an SGI-USA member. She is now, as well as being Sheldon's wife. Deborah joined because she witnessed how Sheldon used the practice to attain victory despite the odds.

Without her support, Sheldon says, he wouldn't have been able to found Wonderland

Gardens.

“In time, through my Buddhist practice, I was able to better understand the concept of destiny,” she says.

Sheldon now realizes that, through this incident, his destiny was changed. His mission was to establish Wonderland Gardens, a combination tribute to his sister Kelly and an effort to unite the community.

“Currently, I have nine Private Industry Council (PIC) teens employed here working 30 hours a week. These kids are having a ball,” says Sheldon. “The area we’re sitting in is Storyland. Here we have children — pre-kindergarten age up to 7 years old — planting vegetables. What I’ve done is train the older PIC kids to assist the younger day care youth to grow and identify the various plants.”

In addition, there are several community groups who plant and harvest the fruits and vegetables at Wonderland and put the food to good use. One such group is the Task Force For The Homeless, spearheaded by Richard Brown, the SGI-USA Atlanta Region leader. Another group is the DeKalb Head Start Program where Sheldon’s wife, Deborah, works. She and the youth from the Head Start Program support the garden activities, cultivating and nurturing the field.

“Just within the last month, we donated somewhere close to 80 pounds of cucumbers to the Atlanta Food Bank,” says Sheldon. He received the Super Seventeen Citizen Award, an award that went out to 17 citizens to celebrate TBS’s 20th anniversary. Sheldon won this award for his donation of vegetables to those in need over the past two years.

Still in the development stage and with 10 acres to fill, Wonderland Gardens is far from complete.

“We didn’t even look like this three months ago,” Sheldon says. “Just recently I got water in here. Back in the summer of 1996, when we broke ground, we were literally trucking barrels of water in here. County commissioners driving by knew there was no water out here and saw this place growing, growing and growing.” People started to take notice that Sheldon and a handful of volunteers were making a difference, that Wonderland Gardens was beginning to happen despite the odds.

There is a bigger goal and future in sight for Wonderland Gardens. Sheldon says that expansion will include greenhouses; nature trails; Japanese, Korean and African-American landscapes; workshops to teach people gardening. “Kelly’s Farm,” a commemorative garden dedicated to Sheldon’s sister, with pick-your-own strawberries, blackberries, boysenberries, blueberries and kiwi patches, is also planned. “We want people to come here to feel and touch,” says Sheldon. “This is about getting involved. It’s about being a part of and experiencing the environment in a favorable way.”

In summary, Sheldon says: “There’s not much difference from planting a seed in the soil than planting a seed on the brain. You have to nurture it.”

The benefit derived from Wonderland Gardens is more than just learning how to plant or garden. It is changing poisonous feelings and experiences into the medicine of joy and appreciation for our lives and the plants and beings that share our environment.

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