

FIFTEEN YEARS ago, if you walked east from Euclid Avenue in St. Louis and made a stop at the corner of Olive Street and Walton Avenue, you'd be confronted with genuine urban decay and pathological ugliness. Contributing to this squalor were an assortment of vacant and abandoned buildings, an automobile graveyard, a warehouse shuttered with sheets of grimy fiberglass, along with the usual trash and broken bottles, creating an atmosphere of urban rot.

Stand on that corner today, and you can see and touch and feel what a strong sense of civic character and ambitious creativity can produce. The merlin of all this was John C. McPheeters, 73, who died Monday night at home in the West End. The magical place he and his wife and children created is Bowood Farms.

McPheeters constructed an urban miracle from collapsed elements of urban dereliction. This miracle recipe conjoins agriculture, culinary art, nurseries, flower and vegetable gardens and a sweet petite cat called Olive -- all dwelling together in a rambling physical and botanical environment animated by human warmth and graciousness.

McPheeters and family brought to Olive and Walton a love and appreciation of Missouri's varied and beautiful landscapes and distilled them into a place of gentle commerce with a keen sense of the sublimity of nature and of good design.

McPheeters was a farmer of the soil and of ideas and invention. Seeds and ideas planted at Bowood Farms have come to a glorious fruition in which art and nature have been farmed to revive a neighborhood and to save it.

After all, as Thomas Jefferson said, "...cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens. they are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, & they are tied to their country & wedded to it's liberty & interests by the most lasting bands." The common denominator of all of this, said McPheeters's friend and associate James Dwyer, is "creative."

Bowood Farm is free of boundaries, and its influence has spread all around the town, and Dwyer's association with Mr. McPheeters on a number of projects, all were generated to advance the quality of design and life in the Central West End and to enrich the cityscape of St. Louis. This work has been performed without a lot of ballyhoo and publicity.

Among the projects receiving the attention of Dwyer and McPheeters is Taylor Park, on Taylor Avenue east of Lindell. This park has a domical structure that refers to the dome of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Louis just around the corner.

Much smaller in size but nonetheless a magnet of imagination for neighborhood children is Kennedy Park, the playground installed in the triangle created by the intersection of Washington Boulevard and Olive Street.

McPheeters addressed his landscaping and design expertise to the grounds of Maryland Place, between Euclid and Kingshighway.

Dwyer said McPheeters was involved, quietly and generously, in much-needed landscaping at Fountain Park, along with efforts to provide regular cleaning up of trash and debris from the important landmark park. It celebrates sculpturally the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The elliptical park straddles Euclid Avenue, a couple of blocks north of Delmar.

Mr. McPheeters was at one time president of the Garden Club of Saint Louis. In a note to its members regarding his death, McPheeters was described as "humble and practical and could turn dreams into action. John loved the Missouri countryside, but was equally involved in nurturing and supporting the city."

Some of the regional projects to which he was allied were carried out in collaboration with his friend and associate, the publisher, author and conservationist Dan Burkhardt..

“John and I became acquainted about 12 years ago,” Burkhardt wrote, “which in St. Louis time is like yesterday. We bonded first over a love of Missouri conservation and a hatred of bush honeysuckle and that provided some pretty good glue. We developed the idea of creating Magnificent Missouri on a drive back from Shaw Nature Reserve one day. John volunteered Bowood as a place for our first event and we were off to the races as we planned our first ‘Conservation Celebration.’”

Burkhardt said that since that first celebration in 2012, Magnificent Missouri has sponsored many outstanding events but probably none better than that first one at Bowood where James Beard award-winning chefs Gerard Craft and Kevin Nashan and friends strung up an entire barnyard of farm animals to roast over open fires.

In the book “Missouri River Country,” produced by Magnificent Missouri, John wrote about the risks - many - and the rewards - few - of attempting to farm on an island in the Missouri River, Burkhardt said. “He tried farming just about everything everywhere from buffalo and basil in Clarksville to soybeans on Bryan Island.

“He was a true lover of St. Louis, of Missouri and all things conservation -- and most things agricultural.

If Burkhardt addresses the regional, the eminent scientist, writer and environmentalist Peter Raven represents the national and international platforms. Like Burkhardt, he has a reverence for John McPheeters and his contributions and the work he did to try to save the planet and to preserve the good that grows and remains in bricks and stone in St. Louis.

Raven recalled, “John and Connie took an old family property near Clarksville, Missouri, and established a flourishing nursery there. Prompted by his love of St. Louis,” Raven noted, is the ‘urban outpost of Bowood.’”

Raven wrote, “With some of his family roots in a fourth-generation farm up the river in Pike County, John acquired an early and passionate love of nature. Any community would count itself fortunate to have a member as kind, generous, encouraging, and unassuming as John McPheeters, a true friend and promoter of many worthy causes.

“John always seemed to care more about others, and especially his family, than about himself and his care for the city was marked by John and his wife Connie moving into town and organizing their nursery in the Central West End. Bowood, with the associated Café Osage, has become a valued city landmark.

“By organizing these lovely facilities, John and Connie succeeded in rejuvenating a substantial area in urban decline, and thus giving an outstanding present to a City badly in need of such attention. Bowood Farms is now a destination for many, an example of what intelligence and good taste can do for enriching our common experience. Its plants and some of the food served continues to be grown at the family farm in Pike County.”

“Along with fellow conservationist Dan Burkhardt, John founded the group Magnificent Missouri in the autumn of 2012, and it has been effective in calling attention to the natural beauty of our area ever since. John and Dan served together on the advisory board of the Missouri Botanical Garden’s Shaw Nature Reserve in Gray Summit, which gave them another chance to enjoy their common interest in nature together. We at Garden have gained a great deal from their thoughtful attention.”

John Carroll McPheeters grew up in St. Louis and attended St. Louis Country Day School and Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. He served with the United States Army in Vietnam. He was the son of the late Carroll West Jones and the late Thomas Shanks McPheeters.

His wife, Connie Bascom McPheeters, survives him, as do his children, Alex Wiles McPheeters (Jenny Korb McPheeters); Lizzy McPheeters Rickard (Dave Rickard); and Katherine Holliday McPheeters. His siblings survive him as well: Tom McPheeters (Nancy); Hugh McPheeters (Muffy); and Peter McPheeters (Eve), as do step-siblings: Jack Legg (Inge); Louisa Deland (Frank); Marnie Reeves (Dan); Mark Scullin (deceased) (Cindy) and Judy Scullin Tilson.

He served on the boards of the Center for Plant Conservation, Bellefontaine Cemetery, The Nature Conservancy, New City School, the Whitaker Foundation, the St. Louis Metropolitan Zoo Museum District, and Magnificent Missouri.

The family requests that donations be made to the Nature Conservancy or to Magnificent Missouri.

Peter Raven provided a final note for this appreciation of John McPheeters life and labors:

“John will be greatly missed,” he wrote, “but he left a lot for the rest of us, both spiritual and concrete.”

Burial will be private.