

## Belpre in Bloom: A Transformative Story

By Lisa Collins

Belpre, Ohio, has always claimed the name “Beautiful Prairie;” however, it’s only lately we’ve reclaimed the spirit of our name. America in Bloom has given us the impetus to make beauty a priority, and our town has come together because of that effort.



Belpre is unique in that we don’t have a downtown. We have two primary business streets, but no “hub” with charming old buildings or a town square. We have a strip center anchored by a big box store, a handful of fast food restaurants, and a lot of small, nondescript buildings. That has made it difficult to create a sense of community and identify a particular place to beautify – until America in Bloom was introduced.

Five years ago, we began with a small committee, planting flowers. We chose the color pink, asked our neighbors to plant pink, and started promoting the idea of Belpre in Bloom. That effort took off quickly and turned into a much larger group of interested citizens. We chose a Miss Belpre in Bloom from our only elementary school, which brought the idea to kids

immediately. We included every girl who participated in the pageant as part of the “court”, which involved parents and grandparents of ten little girls and their peers. We put them in parades on Belpre in Bloom floats and cars. The movement started to take off.

Scouts were invited to create projects around the beautification of our town, and school art teachers jumped on the idea, creating public art pieces covered in flowers. Kids painted tires for planters, and fire hydrants with posies, and Bloom banners were sponsored throughout town. Hanging baskets and giant flower pots were added in strategic places, most noticeably at our riverfront park, and people in neighboring towns began to take notice. A large-scale flower mural on a plain bathroom building in the park drew media attention. A greenhouse sprung up at the high school, where students planted flowers and even grew fresh salad to be used in their school cafeteria. And the beauty continued to spread.



We joined forces with the town’s tree commission, and started planting, pruning, and preserving trees. Entrances to the city have been identified and enhanced, and Welcome to Belpre in Bloom has become a common sight. Suddenly, we aren’t just the sleepy little bedroom community next to a larger city. We are living up to our name, the Beautiful Prairie.

Volunteers can be seen regularly, keeping public areas planted and weeded. Our award-winning America in Bloom status has been the vehicle we needed to transform an aging little town with no real identity, to one that is indeed, a beautiful prairie, and a community constantly abuzz with activity as it continues to bloom.