

## Kendall county garden paradise

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**WELFARE** — Once national leaders in the Catholic social justice movement, a Dominican nun and a convert are turning a seven-acre Kendall County garden paradise into a haven for minority women activists.

Sister Carol Coston earned two presidential awards for her social justice work. Before becoming a 2001 convert to Catholicism, Elise Garcia worked alongside Coston to lead Network, the Catholic social justice lobby in Washington, in the 1970s.

They've stayed active in social justice work since then, and for the past 12 years, they've used that focus to turn a secluded property near Big Joshua Creek into a spread of organically grown edible plants.

They and a group of like-minded women — including former San Antonio City Councilwoman Maria Berriozabal — incorporated in 2001 as a nonprofit under the name Santuario Sisterfarm.

At Sisterfarm, Coston and Garcia have built a sustainable ecosystem with a dazzling array of native plants arranged in multiple gardens. They aren't typical urban gardens, with crops arranged in neat little rows and segregated by species.

"People have been brainwashed to have manicured lawns and gardens as a sign of being good neighbors. It takes an enormous amount of work, and people become slaves to it on weekends. And they use fertilizers and other chemicals that are bad for the water supply," Coston said.

"But nature doesn't create forests and meadows out of single species laid out in straight lines," she said.

Low-maintenance species coexist and contribute to each other's growth at the farm. One small garden contains parsley, borage, chives, rosemary, sorrel, Japanese radishes, sweet potatoes, artichokes and a variety of mints. Another has corn, beans, squash, alfalfa, yacon, quinoa, peppers, lemon cucumbers and numerous other edible plants.

A third is planted with a variety of fruit trees and a peanut patch. A "mariposa garden" is planted with bushes that attract butterflies.

The women recycle shower, laundry and rain water and use subterranean irrigation in the gardens to avoid wasting water through evaporation.



(Lisa Krantz / Express-News)

Elise Garcia picks sweet potatoes from the Turtle Garden while Caliche runs through the garden at Santuario Sisterfarm in Welfare.



Elise Garcia (right) and Sister Carol Coston work together at Santuario Sisterfarm in Welfare. The two have built a sustainable ecosystem.

"We're trying to model living lightly on the land in a sustainable way, acting in cooperation with nature," Coston said. "We need to put back into the earth as much as, or more than, we take from it.

"It takes a transformation of conscience to get people thinking of living this way."

They divide each day, devoting specific times to prayer, gardening, studying, cooking and other necessary activities.

Berriozabal was among the women who helped Coston and Garcia clear the land, build a patio and erect a tower with two small bedrooms. They topped off the tower with a rooftop deck that provides an enchanting view of the surrounding countryside.

They also built a yurt — a canvas-enclosed circular tent — as a secluded meeting space a short distance down a footpath from the house.

Sisterfarm's next goal is to provide badly needed spiritual sustenance for minority women social activists.

"They're prophets — heroes and heroines," Berriozabal said. "They help everybody but themselves. They need a place to replenish their energy and their spirituality."

Garcia said small groups of Latina women already have conducted meetings on the site.

"People need to be renewed and sustained just as natural resources do," she said. "The whole planet faces issues of sustainability. Those of us who struggle for social justice have to face the question of how we keep our energy going for this effort.

"In modern society, people have disconnected psychologically, physically and spiritually. But we all find nourishment in reconnecting with the earth. It restores our sense of peace."