

To my friend, Jerry Pochert

# THE WAY WE LIVE

**SECTION H**

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**Detroit Free Press**

Friday June 15, 1991

Call The Way We Live: 222-6610

**Gardener  
adds love  
to a living  
memorial**



Getting warmed up? The Way We Live celebrates the season each Friday with this series, T.G.I. Summer.



on gray granite marker  
To the Glory of God  
Father, Son & Holy  
Spirit  
in Memory  
Kurt W. Skrade  
1908-1987 underneath





GEORGE WALDMAN/Detroit Free Press

Nettie Skrade designed, planted and tends the garden at Spirit of Christ Lutheran Church in Novi. "A plant can tell of your love," she says.

## Gardener nurtures a living memorial

BY ELLEN CREAGER  
Free Press Staff Writer

She tends the garden every day in summer, because the petunias grow fast and weeds even faster. "Some people say they're gardeners, and they plant beds of begonias and then just leave them all summer," Nettie Skrade says. "Know what? Pretty soon, those beds look like the back wheels of bad luck."

She laughs, and her smile crinkles up brown eyes shaded by a sturdy sun hat over white hair. Her hands are smooth and tan, with freckles making their way up her strong arms. She walks down a curving path of circular stones in the memory garden at Spirit of Christ Lutheran Church in Novi, which she designed and planted. She stops and touches a Bradford pear tree. Her fingers caress the almond-shaped leaves of emerald green.

"If you touch these plants, and just pat them a little bit, a plant can tell of your love for them," says Skrade, who's 84. "A garden is not an emotional thing; it's sensory. All life knows if it's a person who loves them, if you touch the leaves just lightly. Now, this Bradford pear has to be cut back to a globe shape, but we will do it by hand. An electric machine will never touch this garden, absolutely not."

To gardeners, summer means paying attention to the steady rhythm of the

planting season. Despite modern inventions, there's no rushing a ripening pumpkin, no way to halt a daylily in bloom. Beans have to be picked when they're crisp; weeds cannot be allowed to wander out of control; daisies won't wait for a better day to bloom.

Skrade has been dancing to the gardener's summer tune since she was a child in rural northwestern Florida. She was born in 1906, third of seven children in a strict Southern Baptist farming family. Her parents grew 80 acres of corn, cotton, sugar cane, yams and peanuts. But they also had a two-acre vegetable plot, which she and the other children had to tend. Constantly.

"I hated it," she remembers. To this day, she won't plant vegetables. She plants flowers and designs gardens filled with unusual evergreens and bushes. Her latest project is at the church in Novi, to which she belongs. Three years ago, Skrade transformed a desolate patch of clay in front of the remodeled church into a verdant garden. Each plant is in memory of a church member or relative.

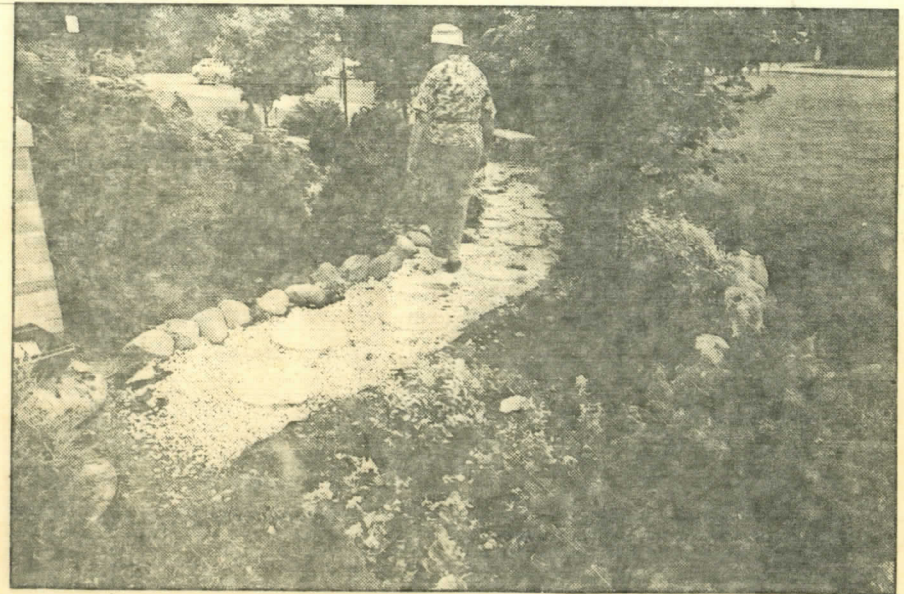
"It's a big joke, because when I'm working in the garden, and someone walks by, I say, 'I'm trimming you back,'" Skrade says with delight.

It's the third memorial garden she has designed. As self-appointed gardener at the churches to which she has belonged, Skrade says churches should be beautiful, both inside and out.

"How people can walk into churches for years on end with the outside totally

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# LOVE IN BLOOM



At Spirit of Christ Lutheran Church, flowers share space with evergreens.



**GARDENER, from Page 1H**

desolate is more than I can understand," she says. "It's the most disgraceful thing I've ever seen."

So her remedy is to haul in some blue stem hollies; Wichita, Alberta and Birdsnest spruces; golden barberries; junipers; and purple smoke bushes. She adds some blue Picotee petunias, miniature roses, white alyssum and impatiens. The garden at Spirit of Christ is three years old, but each year, she adds something new. There's even a bench for the Rev. Tom Scherger to sit on while he meditates. And Skrade has just begun a new garden in the back of the church, which will take some time to mature.

"I have to see a garden through," Skrade says. "My sister is so cute — she's younger than I am, 82. She says, 'Nettie, I'm prepared to go, but I'm not quite ready.' I feel the same way. I have to stay and work on this garden."

But, as gardeners know, there aren't enough days in forever to make a garden perfect. Even 84 summers aren't enough.

"The one thing I don't like — weeds!" she says, bending over to pluck a wayward piece of grass sprouting between patio stones. "I hate that! Look at that! I have to get out here and do some work."

Nettie Skrade came to Detroit at 21, in 1927. She met her husband, Kurt, when she fell down skating on

Belle Isle in her brand new blue pants, and he helped her up. After two children, four grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, and a 55 year-marriage full of "tiffs and tuffs," Skrade says wryly, Kurt Skrade died in 1987.

She gardens partly because "he helped me so much in my gardens, and he was so proud of them. It was the most beautiful thing I could do for his memory."

Course, her husband wasn't much of a gardener, Skrade admits. While she was turning their homes into garden showplaces throughout their marriage, "being German, he would have his little square plot of tomatoes and string beans," she says. "He liked to pick a tomato and eat it with salt."

During the hardest times after he died, gardening was one way Nettie Skrade brought herself out of grief. In the memorial garden, she has planted three rare Japanese junipers to commemorate her husband. His presence still returns to her.

"At first, he did come back often. I'd be running the sweeper in my apartment and I'd feel him beside me, and I'd look around and there he was," she says. "He still comes back. Everybody is not in tune with the infinite, so I don't talk it about it very much. But I'm sure he is in this garden often."

Then she points to a host of Easter lilies from 1990, snuggled at the back of the garden. They are ready to bloom again, and every summer hereafter.

Somebody was going to throw them away, so she took them for the garden and coaxed them through a barren year, back to bloom.

She pauses, and gazes at a Japanese maple she saved by doctoring it with bone meal and Rapid-Gro plant food. Its reddish, delicate leaves quiver in the quiet garden. The summer's warmth surrounds it, just the barest wind passing by.

"I can hardly bear it if a plant dies on me. It's like losing my own child," she says. "My gardens are my refuge and my haven."

Then, she points down the path, and talks about how the garden will look when it's finished someday, maybe next year.

By now, dear Terry, I feel certain every person deserves "5 minutes of Fame" to know the experience of glowing in glory, and distantly feeling as one with real celebrities! If it has not yet been your experience, may it come soon! Ever,  
Nettie King Skrade  
6-23-91