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# Horticulture

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He's not a bird, nor a plane. Spencer Crews is as mild-mannered as Clark Kent. If you dig a bit deeper into the man behind the suit and tie, you'll agree that his accomplishments have been, well, super. If he doesn't already wear a large "S" on his T-shirt, perhaps he should!

Spencer was named Executive Director of Lauritzen Gardens, Omaha's Botanical Center, in 1996. Since that time, he has given leadership to what was originally a small, volunteer-based project and helped it grow to become a multifaceted revenue-generating public garden with a \$3.6 million annual operating budget. Other significant benchmarks under his leadership include a growth of asset base from \$100,000 to \$26 million; acreage from 70 to 100 acres; annual visitation from 5,000 to 160,000; membership from 500 to 8,200 and full-time employees from 1 to 60.

When hired, Spencer was that one and only full-time employee. A few small plantings dotted the garden, which was once a landfill, but it stood as essentially a blank canvas. With guidance and support from the board of directors, Spencer began painting a picture with plants. Leading by example, he brought the board's vision to life. In those early years his leadership meant he even did the planting himself.

He has met and exceeded the board's expectations of what the garden could be, owing perhaps to his love of plants combined with his varied education and work experience. As a youth he took on all the outdoor household chores. He was inspired by his grandmothers' green thumb to further discover the secrets Mother Nature has to offer her willing pupils. He enrolled in the Professional Gardener Training Program at Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pa. He then earned a bachelor's of science degree in landscape architecture from Iowa State University. He received his master's degree in public administration from the University of Missouri.

During his professional life he has worked as a gardener at the Missouri Botanical Gardens, Chair of the Department of Horticulture at East Central College in Union, Mo. and Director of Horticulture for Powell Gardens, near Kansas City. During and in between these positions he also practiced landscape architecture on his own and with other design firms.

Lauritzen Gardens ([lauritzengardens.org](http://lauritzengardens.org)) is now classified as one of the 60 "large" gardens in the United States by the American Public Gardens Association. When asked what makes Lauritzen Gardens different from other botanical gardens, Spencer answers with great pride, "Regionalism." Spencer is a champion

of knowing and using plants "from your

own backyard"—in other words, gardening with natives and adapted natives. He notes that we have to

be aware of the invasive-plant problem and the effect it has on local ecosystems. To that

end, he states the long range goal or vision for Lauritzen Gardens consists of three


components: display, education and research. The garden

started out as a display, grew to offer education and from that

established conservation and research missions. Spencer notes the garden focuses

its research and conservation on the threatened and endangered plants of the northern Great Plains, and in particular, prairie plants.

At this time in his life and stage of his career, he has no desire to retire. He looks forward to transforming the yet-undeveloped acres of the garden. When he does retire, he wants to do so feeling he helped make inroads in scientific research and conservation that will bring about long term benefits to the Omaha-area community, Nebraska and the region at large.

I asked Spencer if there is one thing he would change about the garden and his work there. He chuckled and said, "I wish it was a warmer climate." When he's ready, I'd say this superman deserves his day in the sun. 

# Plains Hero Spencer Crews

by MARIA ZAMPINI ~ photograph by BILL SITZMANN



