

Compost and Sweet Basil in the City

In 1962 a social worker located in a high-crime area in New York City encouraged members of a street gang, who all held a police record, to participate in a tenant gardening contest sponsored by the New York Housing Authority.

The boys were given plowed plots and a small stipend to purchase seeds, tools and materials. They worked diligently all summer creating a Japanese-style garden. They foraged for materials in Manhattan where old buildings had been torn down, finding bricks to edge the garden, pebbles to make a path, plastic to line a pond and lumber to build a bridge that arched over the pond.



After years of efforts as this stimulating an interest in gardening, the city was ready for Liz Christy.

Awakening a City

She was a modern day Johnny Appleseed; but instead of planting apple seeds

across the frontier, Liz Christy would toss seed grenades--balloons filled with wildflower seeds and fertilizer-- into New York City's garbage-strewn vacant lots to see what would grow.

Later, in 1973, she got permission from the city to plant a garden on one of the lots and gathered up a group of people to help her. They hauled off debris and rubble; pulled together



Photo Donald Loggins

The Liz Christy Community Garden

donations of seeds, cuttings and

gardening supplies from seed companies, supermarkets and local nurseries; spread topsoil; put up a fence; and began to plant.

Today, after years of work by volunteers, this garden has numerous bird houses, a beehive, a wildflower habitat, a frog pond, turtles, fish, a compost bin, a meandering path, a grape arbor, fruit trees, herbs, vegetables, a weeping birch tree, wooden furniture and flowering perennials.

After the first garden was planted, Liz Christy and the others moved on to transform other vacant lots, while picking up more and more volunteers along the way. The "Green Guerillas," as they called themselves, eventually helped transform hundreds of vacant lots from urban eye sores into green oasis' of beauty.

They gave away plants and ran workshops. Liz Christy even had her own radio program called "Grow Your Own."

The community gardening movement received a boost when President Jimmy Carter and the state of New York collaborated to allocate \$1.2 million in matching funds for community gardens and



parks in South Bronx after fires devastated the area.

The *Green Guerillas* are still active, along with a rich diversity of other organizations in the city that support community gardening.

"If a group of 12 gardeners are having a planting day but only have two shovels, they can call the *Open Space Greening Program* to have the *Grow Truck* bring them 10 more," said Lenny Librizzi, who works for the program--a branch of the *Council on the Environment of New York City*. "It's a tool lending library," he said, adding that the *Grow Truck* also distributes plants that individuals and companies donate to the organization, as well as materials from a big warehouse full of gardening supplies maintained by the city government's *GreenThumb* program: concrete, fencing, soil, tools, plant materials and lumber to make raised

beds. Groups can even apply to GreenThumb for a grant to purchase a grape arbor, gazebo and picnic tables.

The Brooklin Greenbridge program gives away free trees and recently gave away 12,000 packages of seeds and 10,000 tulip bulbs.

A horticulturist named Luis Lemus drives around the Bronx in a van filled with tools assisting gardeners. He works for Bronx Greenup, a program of the New York Botanical Gardens.

The organization sponsors a compost demonstration site where gardeners can see different ways to make compost bins using wood and wire frames or plastic tumblers. The organization holds free hands-on workshops on such topics as composting, worm farming, planting a spring vegetable garden and garden design. It sponsors seed giveaways and sales of specially priced worm bins, compost bins, books and supplies. It even has a hotline where people can call to find out where to get free compost.

Rooted in Community

The gardeners not only grow vegetables, herbs, fruit and flowers; they also cultivate community. Senior citizens, who might otherwise be haunted by

haunted by loneliness, come to the gardens to tend their plants, play dominoes or knit. On cool evenings they come to relax and chat as they breathe in the fragrance of flowers and herbs.

Before she died at age 83, Ms. Olean For, who helped create the "All People's Garden," said she learned how to do gardening working alongside Liz Christy about two decades ago. She said people would come by to help her when she worked in the garden. "Now, everybody on the block knows me. I walk down my street and get nothing but hugs and kisses," she said.

The gardens have become open-air community centers where people gather for potlucks, gardening workshops and weddings. They gather to hear concerts and lectures or read stories to children. Puerto Rican emigrants hold festivals in the gardens where they roast a pig while musicians play the bomba with guitars, conga drums and guiros made of gourds.

Creating a garden together, teenagers can make memories that will last a lifetime.

Hundreds of students in an environmental club at John F. Kennedy High School in the Bronx in 1995 were disgusted with the tires, garbage and broken down refrigerators in the vacant lot across from their school, as well as the appearance of the school.

"The school was pretty bleak and dull with concrete covering everything," said Abdus Salam, who graduated from Kennedy. "The architectural design of the building looks more like a prison than a school. So the students thought of building a garden to make the school look more beautiful."

They cleaned off the vacant lot and created a lush nature sanctuary called the "Enchanted Garden" that has meandering stone- and brick-lined paths, benches, a composting area and a diversity of habitats and smaller gardens within almost an acre of land.

They created a pond with a bridge over it and lily pads. They made a shallow wetland with cattails, goldenrod, milkweed, marsh marigold, swamp willow and elderberry.

The wetland filters out oil, heavy metals, car wax and soap from water running off the school parking lot before it flows into their pond or into the Hudson River. It also provides breeding and nesting grounds and/or a rich source of food for a diversity of species, such as fish, turtles, frogs, skunks, raccoons, crows, dragonflies, numerous species of birds and tadpoles.

One section of the garden, called the Farm, has an immense variety of herbs and vegetables grown in raised beds. When it's time to harvest the produce, the students feel a real sense of accomplishment. "I was so proud of myself. I'm like wow! This is really a 100 percent job that I've done!" said Abdus.

"We sell the vegetables in the school to the teachers and students and use the money to repair the garden."

Other sections in the Enchanted Garden include: Orchard Hill, which has two apple trees, four peach trees, two apricot trees, two cherry trees, one plum tree and a pear tree; the Rose Garden, which not only has different kinds of roses, but also companion plants such as lavender, chives, lambs ear and bindweeds; the Butterfly Garden, which has plants that provide nectar to Swallowtail and Monarch butterflies; and the Forest, which has a wide diversity of trees.

The students even created brochures with recipes and websites about their garden. One website, created by a student named Omer Illyas, said, "The Enchanted Garden has become a huge part of our school. From the beautiful rose garden to the pond, the garden has opened up a new world for us. In it, we can share our thoughts and realize the beauty of nature."

Schools in New York City use 100 of the community gardens as outdoor classrooms to nurture an ecological consciousness. The children have opportunities to make dark brown crumbly compost out of vegetable scraps, create a worm farm, feed birds and experience the mystery and excitement of germinating seeds. They can observe the diversity of life in healthy soil, smell fresh mint and collect seeds from wildflowers to grow the next year.

Their eyes light up when they pull back leaves and see the pea pods hanging there; and they squeal with delight when they tug on leaves and find a carrot. Who would have thought it possible in a dirty congested city amidst the traffic, asphalt and concrete?

A teacher at the Eleanor Roosevelt Middle School in New York City, Gioya Fennelly, spoke of the social benefit a school garden can have for low functioning children. "The garden is a great equalizer," she said. "I have students who can do nothing in class, but they go out to the garden and pay attention and help teach the other kids. They are leaders."

New York City's community gardens help soften the hard edges of the free market. As developers and speculators bid up the price of land, the gardens redistribute scarce basic resources so that all can enjoy the gifts of the earth.

"The allotments are often very small—just four feet by four feet," said Librizzi. "But it's their little piece of the earth."

In the City Farm program, some of the members are homeless people who are growing large quantities of food to sell or eat. A network of six farms helps market the produce of those in the program.

Ripping the Heart Out of the Community

New York City has the highest rate of population density in the country, but Mayor Rudolph Giuliani set out to increase it. Citing a need for more land so more housing can be built, he transferred all 741 of the city-owned community gardens from the city government's *GreenThumb* program to the development organization in 1998 with instructions to auction them off. But critics say the city owns more than 11,000-14,000 vacant lots as well as a large number of vacant buildings—many of them lovely old tenement buildings that are not being used.

The gardeners did not go quietly. They put up an even bigger fight than they did when Giuliani announced plans to auction off the city's non-commercial TV station--a source of ethnic and alternative news.

One wave of protests was touched off when the city announced plans to bulldoze *el Jardin de Esperanza*—a community treasure developed over a 22-year period of time that had a live rooster, a stage, a gazebo, a grapevine hanging over a fence, an arbor, huge rose bushes, vegetable plots, a common area surrounded with stones and a *casita*, which is a small house used by Puerto Ricans for secular and religious events.

Some protesters built a fire and slept out under the stars. Others lived in a 10-foot-structure of a tiny red Puerto Rican toad they built that contained sleeping space for two people who were to keep watch over the garden. The frog

was used as a symbol of resistance because of a Puerto Rican legend about a monster destroying a forest who was scared away by the tiny frog's loud voice.

When the bulldozers arrived at 3 a.m., the protesters were ready for them. Some of them locked their arms to cement blocks that were buried five feet under ground. Some chained themselves to the fence, while a woman sat in the seat on a 25-foot steel sunflower built by local welders and engineers and locked down her arms.



The annual "Rites of Spring: Procession to Save Our Gardens"

By 7 a.m., 150 protesters had arrived on the scene. The police cut all of the chains except for those of the woman on top of the sunflower. The police finally got her down by telling her the gardeners had succeeded in court. But when she came down, she was arrested.

As the gardens were bulldozed, police sirens were sounding and people were crying.

For weeks after the event, people left candles and flowers in front of the bulldozed garden. Some hung letters of protest and scrawled denunciations of the developers on the plywood wall enclosing the former garden.

The protesters later discovered that the developer that purchased the Esperanza garden and three other gardens, Donald Capoccia, helped bankroll Giuliani's election campaign.

The struggle continues. About 5,000 people from the Lower East Side spend three months each year preparing costumes and programs for the annual Rites of Spring Procession to Save the Gardens held in mid May.

The participants, who are from environmental and cultural organizations, 50 local schools, churches, community centers and after-school programs, create costumes or large puppets held by three people to portray earth and garden characters. For instance, one year there was Compost, who wore potato sacking covered with kitchen cuttings, dirt and twigs; Gaia, or Mother Earth, who sat under a spray of roses, had tulip bulbs in her womb and was carried by maidens wearing white; Herbena, who wore bunches of fresh and dried herbs; a vegetable goddess, who wore a necklace of large radishes and a crown of carrots; 15-foot wildflowers; the Green Man; garden insects; Summer, who wore a hat with grass growing out of it and a long grass skirt; the mud people, who wore almost nothing but mud from head to toe, had huge heads, small sunken holes for eyes, and played tricks on people; and many more characters.

The earth and garden characters ride on floats and are followed by African drummers, people blowing conches, Dominican and Brazilian bands and thousands of

spectators. They weave their way through the city streets on an 8-hour-long pilgrimage to bless each garden on the Lower East Side. They also visit the bulldozed gardens, which are called martyrs.

An earth spirit performs a blessing ritual at each garden by tossing a tulip bulb and perhaps a handful of corn onto the earth. There may be a piece of music, a poem or a dramatization. For instance, one year, children dressed as butterflies did a dance at the Parque de Tranquilidad garden.

That year there was also a dramatization where *Gaia*, the Mother Earth, emerged from a giant pink birth canal, married the *Green Man* and was taken hostage by developers wearing black business suits who threw her into the back of a pick-up truck. She could be heard screaming at various times during the pilgrimage.

In the end, children dressed as butterflies or lady bugs chased away the spirits of the developers, then *Gaia*, the Mother Earth was set free. The finale was when children released live butterflies into the air to protect the gardens.

In another dramatization, *Trash Man*, who was covered with soda cans, was chased and eventually caught by children wearing blue outfits, colorful tassels and signs on their backs that said "urban jungle recyclers."

Once, when the city was auctioning gardens, the highest bidder turned out to be a protester, who was thrown out. The next winner turned out to be a

protester, too. When asked to hand over cash for the over-priced land, she slowly emptied everything out of her purse and could only come up with 37 cents and a metro card. The land eventually sold for \$270,000.

Protesters at a 1998 auction released 10,000 crickets into the auditorium, scattering people left and right. Then there was the time students and senior citizens wearing sunflower and pea-pod costumes sat cross legged on a road, blocking traffic. Even the children got involved by taking the mayor baskets of flowers and vegetables and urging him not to auction off the gardens.

The protesters have jammed phone and fax lines with messages; placed a chain from lamp post to lamp post across a road to block traffic; and sat in the entrance to city hall on the marble floor, many with flowers in their hats, while singing, "We shall tend the earth..." to the tune of the song, "We shall overcome."

At the Earth Shaking protest in 1999, they had street theater, buckets filled with flowers, a brass band and signs. They sang songs and chanted, "New York City has got to breathe, more gardens, more peas!"

There are now 600 gardens, down from 741 when Giuliani was in power. And the struggle continues as real estate developers compete with gardeners for sites. For gardeners, it's a struggle for their quality of life, for community ties and growth rather than isolation and for interaction with nature that makes one feel at home on this earth.