

Community Gardens in New York City

By Govind Gopakumar, Rachel Dowty, and Colin Beech

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Note: There is an extensive published literature on community gardens. The materials that follow represent an introduction to some of the organizations issues. See the bibliography and web sites of the organizations for additional information.

1. New York Restoration Project

By Govind Gopakumar

NYRP was founded in 1995 by singer/actress Bette Midler after her move to New York City. The organization owes its origin to Ms Midler's personal motivation to improve the quality of life of New Yorkers by helping create livable neighborhoods. The mission of the organization is to 'reclaim, restore, and develop under-resourced parks, community gardens, and open space in New York City' as well as to involve the neighborhood's residents, through programs that NYRP conducts, in the maintenance of a beautiful neighborhood.¹ While New York City's flagship parks – Central Park, Bryant Park – receive substantial care and attention, parks and gardens in less privileged neighborhoods have received substantially less attention, it is these parks that are the focus of NYRP's efforts. While parks and gardens are key in the renewal efforts of the organization, it believes that through these efforts, as well as through environmental education and community programs, the reweaving of the social fabric of the neighborhood is achieved. In other words, values such as civic pride, neighborhood ownership and neighborliness are reinvented with parks and gardens as the locus.

Since 1995, NYRP has been involved with a number of local community revitalization efforts in New York City. The organization has raised \$18 million dollars to finance its objective of rehabilitating neighborhood parks and open space especially in economically disadvantaged communities. The organization has acquired titles to 60 neighborhood gardens spread over all five boroughs of New York City. This was a direct fallout of the move by the City of New York to auction 114 community gardens around the city for alternate development. NYRP sees a three tier approach to the management of community gardens under its control. The New York Garden Trust (NYGT), a subsidiary of NYRP, has partnered with community gardeners in order to ensure their continued blooming. NYGT acts as an intermediary group that interacts with community and neighborhood groups and provides support and resources in the care of these gardens. At the lowest tier, "Community Garden Managers are the local gardeners responsible for day-to-day garden operations and maintenance" and they interact with NYGT with regards to improvements of the garden.² An operational resource – the "Borough Center" – is envisaged that will "house all programs and resources provided to community

gardens through NYGT.”³ It will also have teams of volunteers attached to the center who can render assistance to the gardens as they need it. The organization has also concentrated its efforts on revitalizing three existing city parks – Fort Tryon, Fort Washington and Highbridge Park which were cleaned and “119 abandoned and overgrown acres” of park land were reclaimed. The New Leaf Café is “a unique entrepreneurial endeavor” that was launched by NYRP.⁴ Located within the sylvan environs of Fort Tryon Park, the café specializes in providing a fine dining experience. The café has been conceived as a public/private partnership with all proceeds being ploughed back into the restoration and maintenance of Fort Tryon Park. The benefits from the enterprise are thus spread out to the City of New York as well the community where the jobs are created in.

NYRP has adopted a triple pronged strategy of environmental education, recreation and community programs in order to ensure that community gardens and parks remain a focal center of neighborhoods. Programs not only educate school children about plant species, pollination and seed dispersal in the context of the garden but also attempt to incorporate art and literary efforts into the program making it an interdisciplinary offering. Advanced learning opportunities on environmental education concentrate on such fields as “Park Science,” “Garden Science,” and “Aquatic Science.” Recreational programs attempt to reach out to a diverse audience including adolescents, adults and seniors. These include efforts such as cycling, boat building, rowing, gardening. NYRP’s community programs aim to organize fun activities and festivals that get the community together and build bridges in an effort to create cohesive and secure communities.⁵

2. GreenThumb NYC

By Rachel Dowty

The GreenThumb community garden program in New York City began in 1978 as an understaffed municipal organization to give some shape to the amorphous and increasing neighborhood practice of residents adopting abandoned lots as gardening spots. It is now the largest organized urban gardening network in any American city with more than six hundred gardens and approximately 20,000 garden members. As its mission statement explains, “Our aim is to foster civic participation and encourage neighborhood revitalization while preserving open space. Community gardens provide green space and easily accessible recreational opportunities in the areas that need them most. GreenThumb was initiated in response to the city's financial crisis of the 1970's, which resulted in the abandonment of a tremendous amount of public and private land. Residents of these devastated communities transformed these unattractive and unsafe spaces into green havens.”⁶

From its inception, GreenThumb focused on locating community gardens in “economically disadvantaged community planning districts.”⁷ The city approached these gardens as temporary loans of open space, reserving the right to “evict” gardeners with a 30-day notice. However, the enthusiasm with which many residents applied for small grants offered through GreenThumb made the \$1 yearly lease expand into five or ten year

leases by the mid 1980s.⁸ Local community assembly and common ground established by these gardens provided not only green space, but also neighborhood solidarity among diverse families and individuals in all five boroughs of the City. Federal Community Development Block Grants helped catapult GreenThumb into the national community garden limelight, making it “the largest municipally run community gardening program in the United States” by the 1990s.⁹

When Mayor Rudolph Giuliani’s administration threatened destruction of many GreenThumb gardens in 1998, he “cancelled all Green Thumb leases and removed all the Green Thumb community gardens from the Department of Parks and Recreation, and relocated them in Housing, Preservation and Development (HPD).”¹⁰ HPD was no longer required to consult GreenThumb or the Parks Department during evictions. HPD was still required to inform community boards of evictions, but because “community gardens are not included on city maps, notification to the gardens is slow or does not happen at all.”¹¹ While Giuliani called it “plans to build on only 131 - or 18% - of the original 711 ‘Greenthumb’ community garden sites,”¹² GreenThumb gardeners from across the city mobilized in protest. The city’s position remained that the green space needed to make way for desperately needed housing. GreenThumb advocates argued that there were plenty of vacant lots to build housing on other than GreenThumb garden lots, and that the proposed housing was aimed to middle-class white demographics. The facts seem to support their claims in that when “the Giuliani administration first sold a block of 113 gardens ... there were no restrictions on the uses for the lots, and the property rights of the City and the new owners appeared to trump housing rights.”¹³

After much media and political frenzy, including Attorney General Eliot Spitzer butting heads with Mayor Giuliani through a lawsuit, and support from Bette Midler’s New York Restoration Project, a legal agreement was reached. Now some gardens fall into the jurisdiction of land trusts, some are under the Department of Parks and Recreation, some under the Department of Transportation, and some under the Department of Environmental Protection. GreenThumb started a grant program in 2000, called the “Plants and People Grants Program,” but was scaled back in 2003.¹⁴ GreenThumb still actively provides distribution of raw materials, technical support (including networking through their website), community gatherings, and educational workshops throughout New York City for its more than 20,000 involved residents and 600 gardens.¹⁵ The organization is also involved in the Community Gardens Mapping Project, available online through the Open Accessible Space Information System for New York City (OASIS NYC).¹⁶

3. Green Guerillas

By Colin Beech

The Manhattan-based non-profit organization Green Guerillas has been operating for over 30 years. Liz Christy, a founder, helped to create the original Green Guerillas garden in 1973 on the corner of Bowery and Houston streets in a vacant lot.¹⁷ Since then,

the organization has grown to over 600 members who help fund the organization, as well as several foundations. Their staff provides assistance to 200 grassroots groups every year, as well as helping 40 community garden groups enhance their sites. They also play an advocacy role for community garden's who face losing their site to development, and thus participate in several coalitions in an attempt to bolster their local political power.

In the course of 30 years, Green Guerillas have developed over 700 vacant or abandoned lots into community gardens throughout New York City's boroughs.¹⁸ Many, such as the First Presbyterian Church of Newtown¹⁹, will use their gardens to supply local foodbanks or provide space for growing herbs or vegetables indigenous to their member's countries. Their focus has changed over the years, from creating new gardens to protecting those that already exist from development. A major victory for the organization came in September, 2002, when Mayor Michael Bloomberg, "gave permanent status to almost 500 community gardens", reversing the trend set in motion by the Giuliani administration to develop community gardens.²⁰ Part of the agreement was that some community gardens would be lost to build housing, which Green Guerillas director Steve Frillman insists must be made available as low-income housing.²¹

Given how much the Green Guerillas assist and advocate for other groups, perhaps one of their most pressing tasks has been the protection of their own home garden, taken over as part of the parks department in early 2003. The AvalonBay company proposed new construction on the border of the garden property. In order to pour the foundation, however, the developer would have to perform shoring to support the building. The quickest, cheapest way to perform the shoring would have been to excavate several trees from the Bowery Houston Community Garden, including the signature tree for which the garden is known. Facing this dilemma, the Green Guerillas hired an architect to propose alternative solutions; he proposed four viable alternatives, each of which "don't have to come within an inch of our property line", said Penny Jones, a 12 year member. Each alternative, however, is more costly and time-consuming. Bob Paley, senior developer for AvalonBay, assured the gardeners the company had every intention of preserving the garden.²²

¹ New York Restoration Project. 2006. "About Us." (<http://www.nyrp.org/about.htm>).

² New York Restoration Project. 2006. "Mission." (http://www.nyrp.org/nygt_mission.htm).

³ New York Restoration Project. 2006. "Mission." (http://www.nyrp.org/nygt_mission.htm).

⁴ New York Restoration Project. 2006. "Accomplishments." (http://www.nyrp.org/about_accomplishments.htm).

⁵ New York Restoration Project (<http://www.nyrp.org>)

Lives that Make a Difference (<http://www.aetv.com/class/makeadifference/index.jsp>) (http://www.state.ny.us/governor/press/year04/june_17_5_04.htm)

(http://www.state.ny.us/governor/press/oct_98.htm)

⁶ GreenThumb. 2006. "Our Mission." (<http://www.greenthumbnyc.org/mission.html>).

⁷ GreenThumb. 2001. "Program Description." Retrieved May 12, 2005. (<http://www.greenthumbnyc.org/mission.html>)

⁸ Ferguson, Sarah. 2001. A brief history of grassroots greening in NYC. New Village, Issue 1: Community Revitalization. Retrieved May 12, 2005.

(<http://www.newvillage.net/Journal/Issue1/1briefgreening.html>)

⁹ Von Hassell, Malve. 2002. *The Struggle for Eden: Community Gardens in New York City*. London: Bergin & Garvey. Pg 48.

¹⁰ More Gardens! 1999. "Mission and History." Retrieved May 12, 2005.

(<http://www.moregardens.org/?q=node/4>)

¹¹ Hansen, Laura and Steve Zeitlin. 1998. With greenspace for all. *New York Folklore Society Newsletter*. Fall/Winter 1998. Retrieved May 12, 2005. (

<http://www.nyfolklore.org/pubs/news/nlfw98/greensp.html>)

¹² Giuliani, Rudy. 2001. Gardens are great, but not at the expense of new housing. Archives of the Mayor's Weekly Column. Archives of Rudolph W. Giuliani. Sept. 3, 2001. Retrieved May 12, 2005.

(<http://www.nyc.gov/html/records/rwg/html/2001b/weekly/wkly0903.html>)

¹³ Staeheli, Lynn A., Don Mitchell; Kristina Gibson. 2002. Conflicting rights to the city in New York's community gardens. *GeoJournal* 58(2-3): 199.

¹⁴ GreenThumb. 2001. "The GreenThumb Plant & People Grant." See link to application. Retrieved May 12, 2005. (<http://www.greenthumbnyc.org/ppg.html>)

¹⁵ GreenThumb. 2001. "Green Thumb" home page. Retrieved May 12, 2005. (<http://www.greenthumbnyc.org/>)

¹⁶ Open Accessible Space Information System for New York City (OASIS NYC). Available online at: http://www.oasisnyc.net/resources/comm_gardens/default.asp (accessed May 12, 2005)

¹⁷ Green Guerillas. 2001. "What we do." Retrieved May 11, 2005

(<http://www.greenguerillas.org/info.asp>)

¹⁸ Collazzi, Bret Nolan. 2003. "At 30, Green Guerillas refocuses its mission and trudges ahead." *Bronx Times Reporter*, July 31. Retrieved May 11, 2005

(http://www.bxtimes.com/news/2003/0731/Boroughwide_News/030.html)

¹⁹ Melwani, Levina. 2004. "A garden of spirit, and of food." *Newsday*, June 8, A32.

Retrieved May 11, 2005 (<http://www.greenguerillas.org/>)

²⁰ Collazzi, Bret Nolan. 2003. "At 30, Green Guerillas refocuses its mission and trudges ahead." *Bronx Times Reporter*, July 31. Retrieved May 11, 2005

(http://www.bxtimes.com/news/2003/0731/Boroughwide_News/030.html)

²¹ Frillman, Steve. 2002. "Community Gardens" (Letter to the editor). *New York Times*, September 21, A14. Retrieved May 11, 2005

(<http://www.greenguerillas.org/dynamic.asp?ID=189>)

²² So, Hemmy. 2004. "Border war pits garden vs. developer." *The Villager* 74:34.

Retrieved May 11, 2005

(http://www.thevillager.com/villager_87/borderwarpitsgarden.html)

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