

New York's Rare Gardens by Anna Lise Jensen

When I moved to Manhattan Valley, the area where the Upper West Side meets Harlem, it was a community garden nearby that made me feel at home. The 104 St. Garden sits midway between Central Park West and Manhattan Avenue, and it is one of New York's 750 flourishing communal gardens – many of which are now threatened with destruction.

Most of these gardens are part of GreenThumb, a city office that since 1978 has leased vacant city-owned property at no charge to community groups, many in poor areas. Slowly, local residents has turned dangerous and abandoned lots into gardens, and the words most frequently used to describe them are “oasis” and “refuge.”

The 104 St. Garden is three years old and the lots it is rooted in – an east and west lot separated by a five story tenement – were previously empty for more than 20 years. The empty lots were used for drug dealing, as a parking space for car wrecks, and a dumping ground for the surrounding buildings. Many tenants threw their garbage directly from their windows unto the lots below.

The state of the lots reflected a tough neighborhood. Claire Jageman, who with her husband Stan Sparks has lived in Manhattan Valley for almost 20 years, recalls: “The hill straight across from us, in Central Park, was known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the drug run from the projects on the east side. They'd come running through the park and come out here at 103 Street and dash into the subway. Our apartment sat on the 3rd floor, right over the subway, and in the summertime especially, you could hear all the action. You could hear people screaming in the park, the gunshots, the sirens and the scrambling going down the subway stairs...We heard gunshots from the lots and would sit in our living room and go: ‘Well, what caliber do you think that was?’ And then just wait for the police sirens. Sometimes there were no sirens, just the gunshots.”

In 1992, people in the neighborhood took the initiative to make a garden and get rid of the shooting ground, among them Jesse Crawford and Doris Parker from the Northwest Central Park Multiblock Association. First, there was bureaucratic work to get a lease for the lots, and then, in 1994, people began to clear them. The first task was to break a lock that a homeless man had put on the gate. Then they began to carry out the trash, which contained syringes, crack vials and spoons that had been used for free-basing.

It took a whole year just to clean out the two lots. Len Greco, the designer of the garden, remembers: “There was broken glass, mattresses, bags of carpeting, baby diapers that people just threw out the window. There was also a huge metal chimney, as tall as the buildings, on its side. We called the Department of Sanitation for a truck and just loaded up the whole thing.” As the gardeners worked in the heat of that first Summer, some got into arguments, others got discouraged, still more joined.

The next Summer, people began to build raised flower beds, and when Nancy Simmons and Les Christie swung their pick axes, the ground held a few more surprises: they uncovered a whole kitchen cabinet. Finally, the flower beds were done and seeds were in the ground. The city gardeners celebrated by tying a sheet to two poles and watching “Star Wars” in the moonlight on their garden chairs. Neighbors, accustomed to gunshots, complained about the noise.

Today the garden has 67 members, more if you count the children, and the price of membership is \$5–7. Flower beds adorn both lots, in addition to a rose arbor (named after the now deceased Jesse Crawford) and herb garden in the west lot, and a gazebo in the east lot – also the home of the compost bin.

In a city where people rarely know their neighbors, the garden is an easy place to meet. Several mention that they go to the garden if they are depressed, and that the interaction with other people has made them less suspicious of strangers. Everyone agrees that the garden has made the neighborhood safer, and signs hang on the gate,

proudly declaring that the garden won the “Dress Up Your Neighborhood Contest,” in 1996 and 1997. A passerby has defaced one of the signs with graffiti.

The garden seems to remind most people of where they grew up. It reminds Julia Solipsa of Ecuador, Ernestine Gallagher of Florida, Tony Da Silva of Brazil, Claire Jageman of a forest in Westchester County, and Elena Gardener of Costa Rica. Elena Gardner is in charge of the West lot’s herb garden: “In Costa Rica, we use a lot of herbs for tea. You would go into the backyard and cut a herb. I remember my father saying: ‘As long as you can eat the fruit, you can drink the leaves.’... People lived to a good, ripe, old age down there because they grew up on herbs and fruit. Everything was fresh.”

The east and west lots are connected by a small passageway, “Fred’s garden.” Fred’s 2nd floor apartment, in the rear of the tenement building, faces this small strip of land where he has planted vegetables and flowers (including plastic flowers) and hung fairy lights. He has placed chairs here, an ottoman, some tables, figures of Santa Barbara, Buddha and a headless Dalmatian. The dog lost its head during a move, so now plants sprout from its neck. When Fred waters his garden, he attaches a hose to the kitchen sink and climbs through the living room window (he calls it the “guillotine window” as the sash is broken) to the fire escape. So there is Fred, just another New York gardener, standing on a second floor fire escape while waving a hose at his plants and the headless Dalmatian below.

Fred is also the organizer of “Fred’s Night Out,” social gatherings held in the garden for HIV positive men and their friends. His partner, and several friends, died from AIDS and he feels that the garden is a comfortable place for sick people, a place to get sun, rest, talk, see flowers and get energy, “It might not be the miracle of miracles but everything helps. Every little bit of life.”

1997 brought bad tidings to the gardeners of New York: the city has decided to sell its empty lots, including many of the garden lots, for commercial and housing development. GreenThumb will not be able to renew leases for many gardens and estimate that over 50% of the gardens will be lost over the next few years. In spring, gardens all over Harlem, Coney Island, Brooklyn, the Bronx and Manhattan were bulldozed. Gardeners and community activists protested and organized a big “Save our Gardens Day Parade & Rally” in front of City Hall in February. Since then, there have been protests for every garden that has been destroyed. Some communal gardens are more than 20 years old, 200 of them are over 10 years old, and they have become integrated parts of the community. It seems especially cruel that they are destroyed, when there are thousands of empty city lots that could be sold first.

The license of the 104th St. Garden is renewed annually and the head of the garden’s steering committee, Jean Jaworek, remains optimistic about the garden’s immediate future and thinks the license will be extended. However, she adds that one cannot predict what will happen with the garden in the long run.

Most find it hard to believe that the ground beneath them could be disappearing. Nancy Simmons thinks it is illogical: “I really think we have to hold on to these green spaces. Take some of these empty buildings that are so beautiful and renovate them. There are so many beautiful, beautiful buildings just falling apart in Harlem.” Len Greco is frustrated that bureaucrats just look at maps with lots and numbers, where the gardens are not marked, and have no idea how much these gardens mean to the community. Ernestine Gallagher, who has lived in the area for over 40 years, is pessimistic. She feels the garden has “enlightened” the area but is certain it will be destroyed. Julia Solipsa cannot accept this: “When I see beautiful flowers and green, I think, this is not going to be taken away. I don’t think our mayor, or the people who are giving away the spaces, are going to destroy the little bit of nature we have, the little bit of environment we have. If they come and see it, they wouldn’t destroy something that’s so beautiful.”

One can study garden history but it is usually the magnificent gardens of rich individuals or institutions. If these urban patchwork gardens do not survive, they will have to live on in the stories people tell about them: memories of human contact, of a bit of green space in the city with the least amount of park land per capita in America, of individuality in a world where cities seem increasingly homogenous. For now, the remaining gardeners concentrate on their tasks, as they share borrowed moments of both serenity and communal activity in a city that does not have much space, nor mercy, to spare.

Visit and participate in Manhattan's communal gardens before they disappear. They are open from April to October, everyone is welcome but they are locked when the local participants are not in them. They are usually open during week-ends and when people return from work. For more information about the gardens: www.greenguerillas.org and www.greenthumbnyc.org