

Saving Community Gardens in NYC: Land Trusts and Organizing

By Felicia Marcus and Joanne Morse

In the late 1990s, the community garden movement was thriving in New York City. In hundreds of locations, community members had cultivated gardens of all kinds on city owned land. The gardens presented a cornucopia of vegetation—with flowers, vegetables, and fruits. Some gardens were only a sliver of land wedged between buildings, while others were contemplative or artistic, but all were social centers where life literally bloomed.

The Giuliani administration decided to sell off the 114 city-owned lots for development despite the protests of members who had created these oases of green and community. The Trust for Public Land (TPL), is a national nonprofit dedicated to conserving land for people. When it became unclear whether litigation could save the gardens, TPL stepped in and purchased a little over half of the gardens, with Bette Midler purchasing the remainder through the New York Restoration Project.

TPL's 1999 acquisition of 62 community gardens slated for destruction was the single largest nonprofit initiative in America to preserve urban gardens. (Since then, other gardens were added to bring the total protected by TPL to 70.) Some of the gardens have been turned over to the city's Parks Department, others needed to be taken over by the community to ensure that they would be adequately stewarded over the long term. (The deal provided that the land would revert to the city if it ceased to be used for gardens).

With their immediate future secure, during this holding period, TPL invested in physical improvements to make the gardens safer, easier to maintain, and more inviting for community use. TPL also set about helping to create the community infrastructure to care for the gardens over the long term.

"Many neighborhoods where we own gardens are predominantly low-income neighborhoods of color. The gardens are places to bring families and children, and where neighbors get together to socialize," says

Paul Coppa, director of TPL's Garden Land Trust Program in *Dig It! Magazine*. "Gardens enhance civic pride, they really help people take ownership and an interest in their own community. If they are able to be responsible for the governance of a garden, there is greater involvement in taking pride in a neighborhood. This plays a very positive role in contributing to pride in a community."¹

The members of these gardens, representing an extraordinary group of racially, culturally, and economically diverse people, worked with TPL to establish independent land trusts that will ensure the gardens are protected as neighborhood resources for public use; and the volunteer groups managing each garden are open to accepting new members and are governed democratically through group decisions, including voting and elections.

Three New York City land trusts—together the largest urban land trust in the United States—are now established as the Bronx Land Trust, the Manhattan Land Trust, and the Brooklyn-Queens Land Trust.

Gardeners lead each of the three new land trusts and make decisions about the governance and operation of each organization. Each land trust has a Board made up of a majority of member gardeners. The vision is local control of volunteer-managed neighborhood open space; with the land trust organizational structure, the work of protecting and maintaining the garden properties is shared. One of the most exciting aspects of these organizations is the new level of rela-



tionships of mutual help it has fostered among community gardeners. All three land trusts have developed extremely effective Maintenance and Operations committees that help each other take care of the gardens, including the very challenging maintenance of the city water systems. They have also helped each other recruit new members and set up events to encourage participation at gardens where more gardeners are needed.

Classie Parker, a founding member of the West Harlem Garden known as Five Star, describes how lives have been transformed by the garden: “One couple reunited in the garden. We grow herbs that help seniors with arthritis; we rub their hands and exercise. Three classes of pre-kindergarten came and drew plants on a mural featured in school for nine months. Students didn’t know where apples grew or where corn came from, so we got involved with an educational program called ‘Cook Shop.’ They bring children out to the garden and they get a chance to write about an urban farmer, of which I am one. I work with the special education kids at PS76. They calmed down when they came here. You wouldn’t believe how many lives we’ve affected through the years here.”²

Community Ownership vs. Public Ownership

One question that arises in talking about “community” ownership of land is whether it is always better to have community ownership vs. public entity (e.g., city, state, county) ownership. The best answer is that “it depends” on the circumstances. The Trust for

Public Land does a great deal of public land conversion—private to municipal, county, state, or federal. Thousands of threatened properties have successfully moved into public ownership to benefit people for a host of reasons. However, public ownership may not always be best or an option in every case. In this case, the city was going to develop and demolish the gardens, so the best choice was to buy them, and then actually assist in the creation of land trusts to hold them. In other cases, land trusts exist and become logical landowners (there are over 1700 land trusts across the country). In some places, like New York, Newark, and the Bay Area—instead of changing ownership, we have found the best option sometimes is for us to take on the process of rejuvenating a city-owned park or playground and help the city fund the process, which includes extensive community engagement in the design process (e.g., Bayview Hunter’s Point or our New York Playground Program).

So, there is no set rule as to which is better—it depends upon the circumstances of the place and its community and institutional infrastructure. Regardless of technical ownership, however, the presence of an engaged community, interested in the stewardship of the land is a critical factor in its ongoing preservation—whether through physical stewardship, or through a watchdog or support role to a public agency.

Endnotes

1. Jasch, Mary. “In Land We Trust” *Dig It! Magazine*, October 1, 2003.
2. *Ibid.*

Photo:

Classie Parker, a community gardener at Five Star Garden in Harlem, works with the National Science Foundation’s Garden Mosaics project in which, students and educators are paired with local gardeners to exchange ideas about agriculture, land use and science.

Credit: Mark Whitmore/NSF

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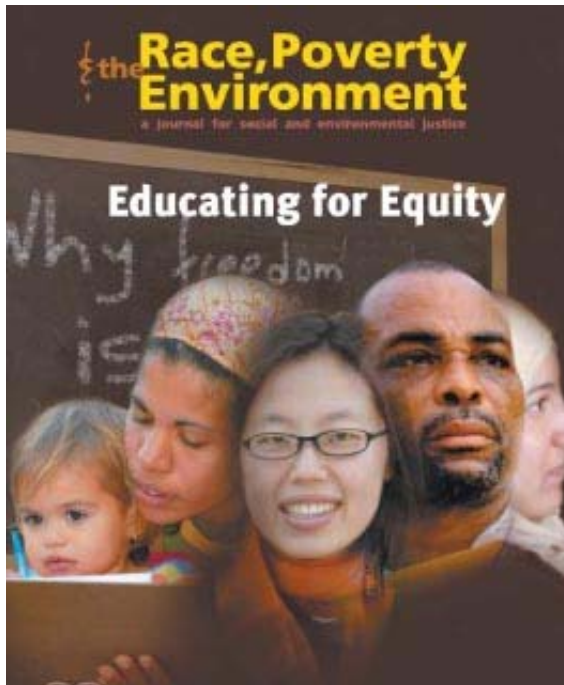
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