



The Re-Greening of Public Housing

Interview with Rob Bennaton

New York City Housing Authority Garden and Greening Program
New York, NY

Lindsay Campbell: How did the New York City Housing Authority Garden and Greening Program come about?

The New York City Housing Authority (NYCHA) was established in 1934 to provide affordable housing for low- and moderate-income families. The Garden and Greening Program was conceptualized as the Tenant Garden Program by Ira D. Robbins, a 1960s NYCHA board member, as a means to beautify housing grounds in an aesthetically pleasing and economically efficient way. Robbins learned from his visit to the Chicago Housing Authority that garden competitions were used to inspire beautification, except that the garden cultivators there were the grounds staff. He applied this basic concept in New York, emphasizing resident stewardship over staff maintenance. This vision of resident engagement as garden stewards has developed over the decades into more complex sets of issues and relationships linking to ownership, access, and control of one's immediate environment. Today, there are about 650 active gardens on NYCHA grounds and 3,000 gardeners, approximately 2,700 of whom are youth.

NYCHA Garden and Greening outreach coordinator Howard Hemmings (*left*) with Mr. Miller, a gardener at Mariner's Harbor houses in Staten Island.

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What kind of support does the program provide gardeners?

The five things that the Garden and Greening Program provides are:

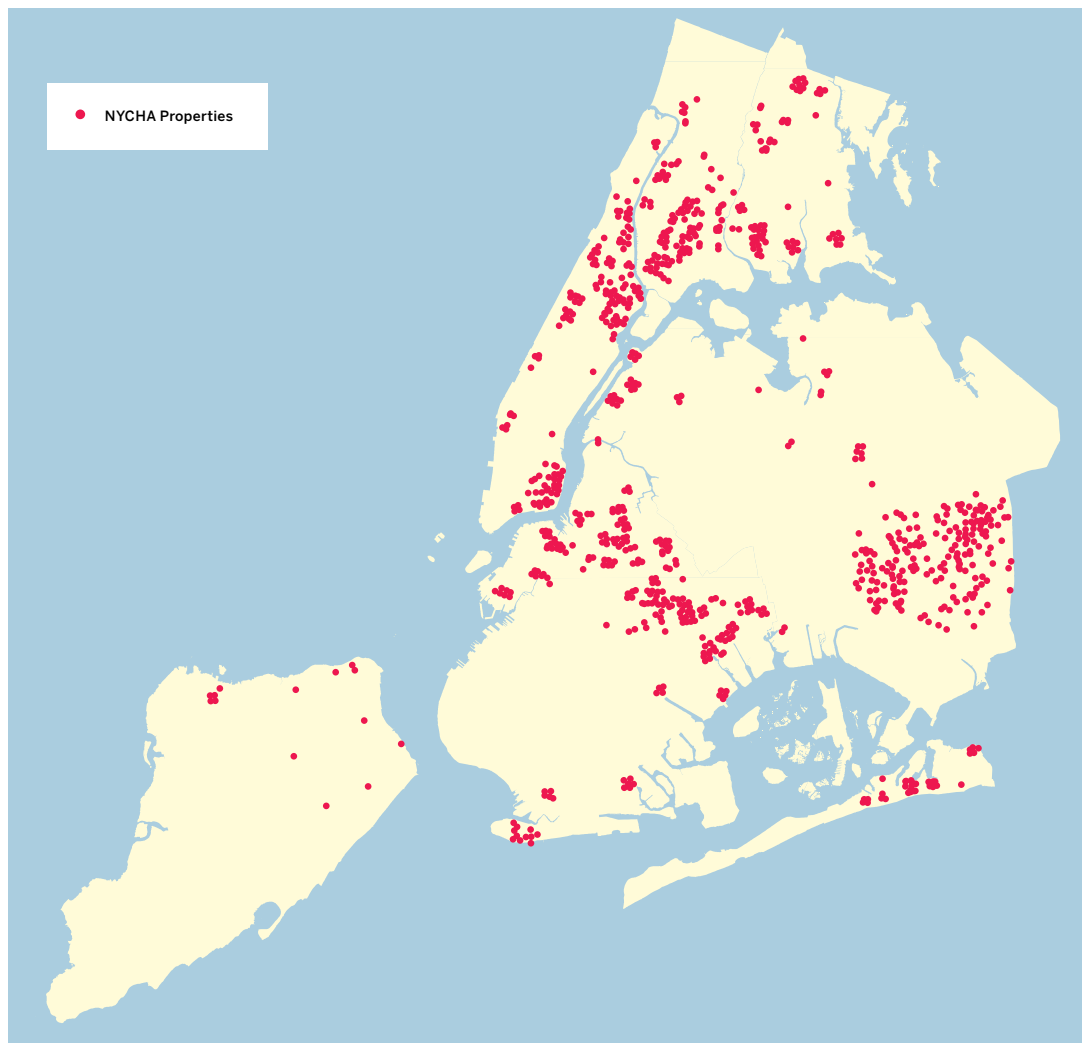
- Free seeds in the spring and summer
 - Free bulbs in the fall
 - Technical assistance from Garden & Greening Program staff
 - Reimbursement from the property management office in each development for up to \$40/registered garden
 - Some level of support from property management, which varies by development and can include: helping turn the soil, supporting the gardeners with watering hoses, lending of a shovel or two, etc.
- In addition to that, when management is willing and able to go retrieve it, they can get free leaf compost for those gardens to improve the soil quality from the Department of Sanitation.

There are a lot of different garden programs in the city, but NYCHA's centers around a garden competition whereas others do not. Can you talk a little bit about the strengths and weaknesses of having the competition as a key feature?

Our program is very different from the New York City Department of Parks and Recreation **GreenThumb Program** and many other community gardening programs. Although NYCHA is moving toward a community gardening-like program, it's always been management's policy that these gardens do not belong permanently to a particular resident gardener or group of residents. The lands being cultivated revert back to the responsibility of a development's grounds staff when residents can no longer care for it because the condition of the grounds is ultimately the housing development management staff's responsibility. This presents some challenges for cultivating true long-term stewardship and a sense of ownership of the grounds.

Of the 650 gardens on NYCHA lands, approximately 500 gardens are officially registered with the garden competition and the remainder, often, are not registered but continue to be cultivated. Through NYCHA's citywide garden competition, the gardens are assessed for their horticultural cultivation practices, aesthetic value and/or alignment with a theme if a 'theme' garden. Judges look for signs of active garden maintenance, such as weeding, deadheading, mulching, amending soil, or using beneficial insects, and so, horticultural skills are encouraged

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Citywide map of the 343
NYCHA development sites.
There are approximately
2,600 acres of open space
on NYCHA grounds.

DATA SOURCE: NYC DEPT
OF PLANNING; MAP CREATED
BY JARLATH O'NEIL-DUNNE,
UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT

and rewarded. The competition as a starting point for a gardening program is something of a double-edged sword, both a strength and a weakness. It does promote healthy competition between residents, housing developments, and boroughs. But it also breeds the inevitable disappointment for those who don't win, and sometimes causes them to drop out of future competitions.

And has the program changed over time?

In 2002, after 40-plus years of running the garden competition, the rules were revised to reflect a changing understanding of the social function and value of these sites, as well as to improve them in terms of environmental sustainability. Howard Hemmings and I, both Community Coordinators, have sought to make it possible for gardeners to build and nurture social connections and environmental values through the gardens, not just within the housing developments, but by helping to support gardens as connectors with neighborhood residents as well. For example, an obsolete rule stipulated that perennials were not allowed in the gardens for reasons that are not clear. Well, perennials are now permitted in housing gardens because they are not only the sustainable foundations of a flower garden, but a resident's sense of connection to place that perennials can inspire is now understood as a positive. Perennials are also sustainable in the biological sense of returning annually from their roots with even greater growth, and providing needed resources and cover for native pollinators and birds. In the long run, we're hoping to develop these gardens as open spaces that will continue to be cultivated by resident membership groups through the generations. Over time, a resident membership base may develop that will seek to preserve some land for open space stewardship.

Focusing in on the theme of Restorative Commons, what do you see as the relationship between your gardening program and human health?

Gardening is a multifaceted activity that has social, environmental, aesthetic, and health impacts. Here are just a few examples of some of the benefits of gardening and open space that I have observed through this program:



St. Nicholas Houses, Harlem

At the St. Nicholas Houses in Harlem, they are developing a project to provide opportunities for physical activity within the landscape. The project involves developing a 1-mile walking path throughout the grounds, surrounded by plants and trees selected for easy maintenance, year-round interest, and pollinator value in partnership with the District Public Health Office of Harlem, the Neighborhood Open Space Coalition, NYCHA's Garden & Greening Program and the Department of Parks and Recreation. The Department of Health and "Take A Walk, New York!" program organize walking groups out of the senior centers to help address the dual concerns of diabetes and obesity. The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation aided the project by fully planting the perimeter trees on the street surrounding the development.

St. Nicholas Houses' current Manager Doreen Mack has many years of experience in the field, having worked with the citywide capacity-building nonprofit, Citizens Committee for New York City, and is an entrepreneurial advocate for her 15.3-acre grounds. Mack has stated, "Personally, I love flowers, I think they're calming. Gardening puts away some

of the drug activities because people congregate." Mack believes that for the stewards themselves, gardening provides exercise, activity, and a source of relaxation and pride. For those who simply see the gardens or walk by them, they provide visual interest, and reduce the amount of garbage dumped: even less mobile residents can benefit from looking out their windows at gardens. At St. Nicholas Houses, Mack hopes that eventually all 14 buildings plus the management office will have a garden; currently there are six gardens on the grounds. She believes that the 1-mile walking path can be a connector for those gardens.

Seniors using the "walking trail" at St. Nicholas Houses in Manhattan.

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BY DAVE LUTZ, NOSC

- Horticulture can be used to help with anything from drug rehabilitation to relief from stress. In a city with 8 to 10 million residents, where people are always rushing, crowded on the subway, and generally stressed out, gardening can be an outlet to deal with that stress.
- **Gardening is a form of recreation that is not too physically demanding and provides slow and steady exercise.** John Reddick is a program consultant with the Trust for Public Land, a many-time judge of the Garden and Greening Program, and a consultant in the NYCHA community centers. Reddick noted, "Gardening is the only exercise some of these seniors get. It gets their day started in the early morning."
- Many of the active senior citizen stewards claim that they garden because it makes them feel good psychologically. Stewards are also motivated to garden because of the impact it makes on their communities. To quote Dr. Roy McGowan, former consultant of NYCHA, "Gardening is a nonconfrontational way to reclaim the land for productive and positive use."

Gardens can thrive even in the "found space" alongside parking lots and sidewalks; Saratoga Square in Brooklyn.

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- Vegetable gardens cultivate fresh, local food that offers an alternative to fast food and bodega snacks. They also serve an educational function in teaching children where vegetables come from — the soil in the ground rather than the supermarket. One of the challenges that our program faces is that some of the community centers grow food but do not harvest it. There is still a lot of technical assistance that needs to be provided to develop the gardens as viable urban agriculture sites.
- Plant cultivation offers an opportunity to connect with cultural roots. Many of the older gardeners grew up in the south, the Caribbean, or in other agrarian cultures, and value that way of life. Often, they want to plant collard greens and okra, or habanero chile peppers to have a taste of their cultural heritage, and recall their own roots. However, in the last 30 years there has been little turnover in residents and many of the people now living in NYCHA housing have grown up there. This connection with agriculture may be on the wane. Thus, we need to continue to develop interest in agriculture and land stewardship in light of the new populations we are serving.

Looking to the specifics of the Garden & Greening Program, how do the NYCHA gardens promote environmental sustainability?

One of the other main objectives of the garden program is to improve environmental quality as a whole, including: air quality, soil quality, and water quality. First, we now allow residents to plant perennials, including woody materials like trees and shrubs in addition to gardens, so that we're not only beautifying the open spaces and greening them up, but we're also fixing carbon.

Similarly, soil quality can be significantly improved with compost. We have reinstated what was in the original garden competition rules: soils, particularly those in first-year vegetable gardens, should be tested. With water quality, we're improving water bodies and waterways by retaining water so that it doesn't get onto the ground and become storm water runoff that carries nitrates and phosphates. Rainwater harvesting, a best management practice recently approved on a small scale by NYCHA's administration, is one step to doing that. Many of these issues are discussed in the book "Gardening for the Future of the Earth" by





Shapiro and Harrison (2000), which describes how gardening can truly help to restore the healthy functioning of the earth.

What are some of the biggest challenges your program is facing now?

Historically, our programs were based out of the operations budget, which ultimately comes from rent and subsidies from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). Under the current Federal administration, funding for those subsidies has significantly decreased and NYCHA faces a very significant deficit. This and other factors have resulted in a vast reduction of the number of grounds maintenance staff in recent years.

Agency budget and staff reductions within the developments diminish capacity to assist gardeners with support such as turning soil and providing access to water sources. Grounds supervisors and staff must focus a great deal of attention simply on removing trash and debris with less person power than ever before. Ideally, the Garden and Greening Program could be expanded to include an outreach coordinator, as well as additional program coordinators serving each of the five boroughs of New York City. In the face of these significant funding cuts, NYCHA has rightfully focused its core resources on housing building upkeep rather than grounds maintenance and stewardship. Understandably so, as those upkeep needs are substantial.

It is critical that the above-named fiscal crisis not become an obstacle to resident garden stewardship because their voluntary garden maintenance can help NYCHA focus even more on its core mission of providing affordable housing services. By reducing the land maintenance burden on the shoulders of grounds staff, gardens in public housing can add value to existing open spaces, protecting public housing for both the affordable housing and ecological services it provides.

So, what next?

To better cultivate long-term stewardship of the NYCHA sites, the program is trying to build relationships between resident garden groups and local community resources. This presents one mechanism for overcoming physical and social barriers between public housing

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Rodriguez and McKay's
flower garden at Patterson
Houses in the Bronx.

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From MillionTreesNYC press release, April 2008:

Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg and David Rockefeller announced their joint pledge of \$10 million to the MillionTreesNYC initiative to plant trees in public spaces including NYCHA developments and at City schools. This donation of private funds made to the Mayor's Fund to Advance New York City by Mr. Rockefeller and Bloomberg Philanthropies will allow over 18,000 trees to be planted throughout the five boroughs. Thanks to this donation, all nine of NYCHA's housing developments in East Harlem will be fully planted ahead of schedule and by the close of this year's tree planting season....As a result of this generous donation, more than 10,700 trees are slated to be planted on NYCHA property....Plantings will focus initially on sites in specially designated "Trees for Public Health" neighborhoods that have fewer than average street trees and higher

than average rates of asthma among young people. These neighborhoods include Hunts Point, Morrisania, East New York, East Harlem, Stapleton, and the Rockaways. Funding will also be allocated for education and outreach efforts in these neighborhoods. In addition this gift will be used to help fund a new job training effort, the MillionTreesNYC Apprenticeship program, which will connect City youth to the numerous "green collar" jobs that PlaNYC is creating. Jobs related to tree planting and care are currently in high demand as a result of MillionTreesNYC, and the Apprenticeship Program aims to provide the skills that youth need to capitalize on well-paying career opportunities....The program will include NYCHA residents within the target population for training in jobs that involve the planting, pruning and stewardship of the trees.



Vegetable gardens and tree canopy at the Pink Houses in Brooklyn.

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residents and their surrounding neighborhoods. Tenant associations are also an under-utilized, yet potential ally. These organizations serve as advocates for tenant rights on a wide range of issues, but relatively few of them are actively involved in the program. Corporate partnerships present new areas of opportunity as well. For example, Home Depot has supported resident gardening efforts with in-kind materials at the Polo Ground Houses Senior Center.

More good things are in the works, but all of them involve a need for the agency to broaden the programmatic scope of the Garden & Greening Program, as well as infrastructural support in terms of increased numbers of staff, vehicle access, and materials storage. Recent developments, including PlaNYC 2030, as well as the support of a strong environmental quality proponent in NYCHA's newly appointed agency Environmental Coordinator are positive signs of what is to come.

There is enormous opportunity to re-envision NYCHA landscapes as **dynamic, productive, ecosystems** serving the health and well-being of residents and the wider city. NYCHA oversees approximately 2,600 acres of open space with an estimated 46,000 trees and provides housing for a half-million tenants in 343 complexes across the five boroughs. NYCHA's existing social services infrastructure organizes residents and the surrounding neighborhoods around their 40 senior centers and 110 community centers that provide after school, summer day camp, and mature adult programs. Beyond these, NYCHA leases community facility spaces to a large variety of nonprofit agencies that operate in New York City public housing developments, including the noted "I Have a Dream" Program, the Institute for the Puerto Rican and Hispanic Elderly, and STRIVE, to name a few. There is great potential for improvement of environmental quality through the vast social capital that the New York City Housing Authority resident populations represent and the community facilities through which they serve.

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Literature Cited

Shapiro, Howard; Harrison, John. 2000. *Gardening for the future of the Earth*. New York: Bantam Books.

Amending the soil to create a new garden bed at Astoria Senior Center, Astoria Houses in Queens. PHOTO USED WITH PERMISSION BY PHOTOGRAPHER LLOYD CARTER, NYCHA