

Cultivating the Community

New York City's Organic Gardens

By John Kepner

In April 2000, participants of the 18th National Pesticide Forum, Solving a Public Health Crisis, had the opportunity to visit two community gardens in New York City, the neighborhood-run Taqwa Community Farm and the student-run Enchanted Garden at JFK High School, both in the Bronx. Members of the Green Guerrillas, a non-profit organization dedicated to the New York City community garden movement, led the tour.



Head gardener, Abu Talib tells the history of the Taqwa Community Farm to the participants of the 18th National Pesticide Forum, New York City.

In 1992, Abu Talib and the others received permission from the city to garden half of the vacant lot at 164th Street and Ogden Avenue, which at the time was littered with hypodermic needles and illegally dumped trash. The neighborhood pulled together, cleaned the lot and planted for their first season. They were told by the city that if the garden worked out, the following year they could have the rest of the lot. After only six months, they were given the full two acres.

Taqwa Community Farm

The neighborhood surrounding the Taqwa Community Farm, an organic community garden in the South Bronx, is not exactly a regular stop for most New York City tourists. But in this vacant lot where visitors to the neighborhood might have seen debris and despair, a group of local residents had a vision of hope and saw great resources for the community. "This community seemed like it had died; narcotics had taken over," recalls Abu Talib, one of the head gardeners and founders of the Taqwa Community Farm. "Neighbors asked me to get people together and do something for the community. We had several meetings and we talked, talked, talked and nothing happened. Eventually one sister said let's get us a lot. And God bless, there was a lot."



Daffodils brighten this formerly vacant lot in the South Bronx.



Abu Talib explains the health benefits of mudwort, which can be brewed as an herbal tea.

Since its start eight years ago, the garden has certainly been a success. Upon entering the Taqwa Community Farm, you realize that the gardeners have created an atmosphere of beauty and tranquility. Inside the gate, a path lined with daffodils and tulips leads to a trellis covered in grape vines, where the young gardeners finish their homework before starting their work in the garden. Side paths intersect the main walkway, wandering through the raised beds of wooden planks and imported soil, growing potatoes, spinach, string beans, collards, carrots, squash, peas and cabbage for the season's harvest. There are also blueberry, raspberry and mulberry bushes and recently planted fruit trees. Once, Talib was challenged by a neighbor who said there was no way that anyone could grow corn in the middle of the city. So that was exactly what he did.

Off to the side, native herbs grow in a pyramid-like raised bed structure. "I didn't plant it," insists Talib, "The birds

brought it, squirrels brought it, God brought it. We just cultivated it.” During the garden tour, Talib, who is also an experienced herbalist, explained the health benefits of several herbs growing at Taqwa to the participants of Beyond Pesticides/NCAMP’s National Pesticide Forum. “The knowledge is around, but it’s not making money for the drug companies. But I’m not into the drug companies. I’m into getting well, and the people here are well.”

In addition to Talib, there are over 100 families that have garden plots in the Taqwa Community Farm. In 1999 the gardeners produced over 5,000 pounds of organic food, half of which was donated through Taqwa’s own Grow and Give program. “We line two long tables with food,” explained Talib. “People who are hungry come in and take what they need. What the heck are people doing hungry in the country with the best land in the world? It’s not perfect, but I do the best I



A mural, mounted to the side of an adjacent building, depicts a summer afternoon in the Taqwa Community Farm.

can do to change this whole system around.” The Taqwa Community Farm also donates to local soup kitchens and is an active participant in the City Farms project, a collaborative program consisting of non-profit organizations, community gardens, and emergency food centers that work together to boost urban food production.

In the summer, the gardeners organize community barbeques in the garden, serving food from the season’s harvest. A mural on the side of an adjacent building depicts the important role that the garden plays in the life of the neighborhood. Ximena Naranjo, associate director at Green Guerrillas explains the importance of community gardens beyond food production, “It’s not Central Park, but people can feel like it’s their Central Park. The people who build community gardens are community leaders. They took it upon themselves to revitalize the community by creating a place where people can feel



The Enchanted Garden serves as an interdisciplinary learning space for the students of JFK High School.

safe. Everyone has a right to open space.” Abu Talib is also a firm believer in the empowerment of working in the garden, saying, “He who controls your breadbasket, controls your destiny. I think that one of the things we overlook if we have a garden, is that we’re not just raising food, we’re raising people.”

The Enchanted Garden at JFK High School

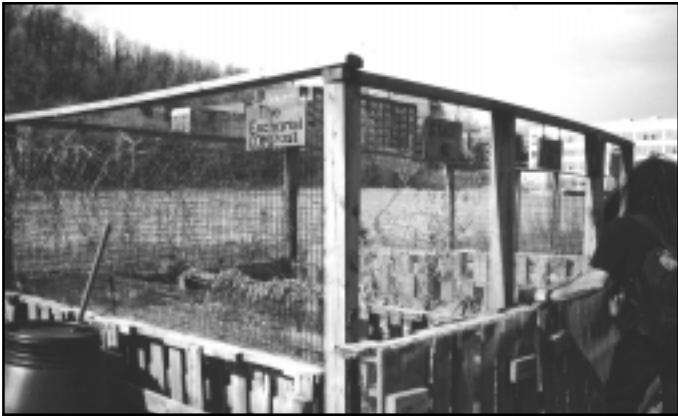
Five years ago a group of students from one of the most populated high schools in New York City were tired of looking at garbage piling up in the vacant lot surrounding their school and set out to convert it into a green, peaceful and productive garden. JFK High School, located in the Bronx, is a massive building with eight floors holding 4400 teenage students and



The students converted a water run-off ditch, once filled with bags of trash, into an aquatic garden, complete with goldfish and lily pads.

300 teachers. A group of 93 students, who make up the environmental club, now manage “The Enchanted Garden,” located next to their school parking lot.

The entrance of the garden brings you to the beginning of three paths from which to choose. The right path will take you to a small wetland full of cattails; the center path walks you through a shaded garden to a bridge that crosses a pond where goldfish and turtles live. The path to the left leads to eight raised beds for intensive food production. As a member of the City Farms project, the students established a relationship with a soup kitchen in Harlem, to which they donate part of their harvest. Tony Thoman, one of two teacher advisors to the Enchanted Garden says, “Involvement with City Farms has given our kids a view as to how the garden can be a food resource to the less advantaged in the community.”



Nutrients from the "Enchanted Compost" replenish the soil in JFK High's organic garden.

The garden is also a great resource for the students. Joyes Baby, a member of the environmental club recalls, "We planted an herb garden as part of our summer project. In September, we dried the herbs in our ovens at home and sold them in the teachers' lunchroom along with fresh cut flowers. We made \$220! Now we're doing research on how to make soaps and candles with our herbs." Through grants from the Hudson River Foundation, the Enchanted Garden provides rewarding summer jobs to several JFK High School students. Students also conduct research and produce pamphlets on the many butterfly and bird species living in the garden.

The presence of the Enchanted Garden at JFK High School has an undeniable, positive impact on the students as well as the ecological environment it embodies and sustains. The garden provides a holistic learning space where students learn to work as a team as well as express their individuality. They can enhance their scientific research skills or explore their artistic creativity. When one walks into the Enchanted Garden, there is a magical feeling, not only because the breeze carries a fragrance of roses and sage, but also because of the sense of empowerment and confidence heard in the students' voices as they speak with pride and love for their garden.

The City Farms

Hunger and unemployment are a reality in New York City's low-income neighborhoods. From 1980 to 1997, the number of emergency food centers soared from 50 to over 1,000. While 450,000 New Yorkers were served by emergency food centers

every month, 73,000 people were still being turned away. These numbers mushroomed as welfare reform took effect. Simultaneously, the regional agriculture and the capacity to address food needs sustainably declined. In New York State alone, nearly 20,000 farms and over 1 million acres of farmland have been lost since 1980.

In March of 1996, a number of people gathered at the invitation of Just Food and the Green Guerillas to work towards a solution to this urban food crisis and to learn more about the city's community gardens and how they could serve as an important component in the process. What they learned was that although there were many independent gardens in the city, they were primarily ornamental gardens and food production was minimal. Looking at the tremendous and rising needs that could potentially be met by this huge, untapped resource, the organizers explored the role that their organizations could play in helping community gardens contribute to local food security.

Later that year, five groups consisting of Just Food, Green Guerillas, Cornell Cooperative Extension-NYC, Food for Survival, Inc. and Northeast Organic Farming Association-NY, formed the City Farms project. The City Farms helps people who live in low-income neighborhoods to create an urban agriculture network in New York City

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**—Abu Talib
co-founder Taqwa County Farm**

and by helping regional farmers develop long-term relationships with New Yorkers and familiarity with urban markets.

The goals of this project include: improving the availability of fresh food in New York City's low-income neighborhoods by expanding the capacity of urban grower to pro-



In 1999, the City Farms Program produced over 10,000 pounds of food for the residents of New York City.

duce organic, nutritious food and distribute it to local residents through established food sites; promoting community-based entrepreneurship and economic opportunity through food production, processing, and marketing; strengthening urban markets for farmers by fostering relationships among city residents and regional growers; and building public support for the preservation of open space for food production. Currently, there are 15 gardens, located in each of the 5 boroughs, participating in the City Farms project. Both the Taqwa Community Farm and the Enchanted Garden are City Farms members.

Community Gardens Threatened by Development

Community gardens have been slowly losing ground in New York City for many years because of development and a lack of support from city hall. However, the fate of the gardens took a turn for the worse in May of 1999, when Mayor Guillian turned the garden lots over to the Department of



In a collaborative effort with the Cornell Cooperative Extension, gardeners set up a hydroponic gardening system in the Taqwa Community Farm.

Housing and Preservation. Immediately, 113 gardens were on the market for development. Today there are over 500 gardens in the city that could be bulldozed at anytime. New York City commissioner Richard Roberts claims that development of the lots is needed for affordable housing. They dismiss claims that the city is trying to make money in a hot real estate market.

While Ximena Naranjo and most gardeners agree that affordable housing is needed in New York, she contends that the city's intentions to sell the lots are not honorable. "There are 11,000 vacant lots in the city, but the gardens make the area more attractive and more profitable for the city." Naranjo also points out that the city was not selling the land just to be developed for low-income housing, but to the highest bidder.

One day before the city was going to auction the first 113 sites, the Green Guerillas hosted the *Save the Gardens* benefit

to raise money for the gardens. Author and urban farmer, Michael Abelman explained the importance of the gardens at the Green Guerillas benefit. "When the food system no longer fulfills the needs of the people, whether for economic or distribution reasons or because of concerns for food safety... they take the opportunity into their own hands. While many people may look to a new agriculture as the source of salvation, the truth is that the real revolution is taking place in the neighborhoods, backyards, and towns."



Gardener Bobby Watson explains the need for the gardens in the community.

Fortunately, people agreed with the Abelman and the Green Guerillas. On May 13, 1999, due in part to the support of foundations and celebrities like Bette Midler, the 113 gardens auctioned by the city were bought and preserved. "Community gardens reflect the personality and character of the neighborhoods they're in and are vital to improving the quality of life for all the citizens of New York," Midler told USA Today last May. Unfortunately, the fate of the remaining 500 gardens, however, remains in limbo. New York State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer has temporarily protected the gardens with a lawsuit stating that the gardens cannot be sold without an environmental-impact statement. The city is currently appealing the restraining order.

For more information on New York City's community gardens contact: Green Guerillas, 625 Broadway, 9th Floor, New York, NY 10012, (212) 674-8124, www.greenguerillas.org. For information on the City Farms contact Just Food at 307 7th Avenue, Suite 120, NYC 10001, 212-645-9880, www.justfood.org. For information on community gardens across the country or to get in touch with a garden in your area, contact the American Community Gardening Association, 100 N. 20th Street, 5th Floor, Philadelphia, PA 19103, (215) 988-8785, www.communitygarden.org.