

Urban Agriculture Notes

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"Rooted in Community"

Community Gardens in New York City

**A Report to the New York State Senate
written by Carole Nemore of the Senate Minority Office.**

State Report Confirms Broad Garden Participation

In a report to the New York State Senate entitled "Rooted in Community", Carole Nemore, writing on behalf of State Senator John Sampson, urges preservation of community gardens in New York City in conformity with recommendations in NY State's Open Space Plan. The report was an outcome of a research effort during which questionnaires were sent to most of the City's GreenThumb gardens. Armed with the information provided by participating gardeners, the report showed a large amount of intergenerational and multi-cultural participation in community gardening, and a wide-range of non-gardening activities taking place in the spaces.

Introduction

In the spring of 1997, a lead article in the New York Times reported New York City's policy to sell off city-owned lands on which community gardens are leased by local groups. This was the first news that members of the State Senate had that community gardens were threatened with extinction. In response to such alarming news, State Senator John Sampson introduced legislation in the Spring of 1997 to preserve community gardens. Later, Senator Velmanette and Assemblymen Jim Brennan and Clarence Norman joined Senator Sampson in co-sponsoring the bill, S.4720-A/A.8991, which would dedicate community gardens as parklands of the City of New York and thereby accord them permanent open space status. It also empowers Community Boards by requiring their approval before a community garden could be withdrawn from the program. Many impediments stand in the way of its enactment, however, including the need to alert more public officials as to the benefits that community gardens impart on the quality of life of New Yorkers. We could simply not let community gardens be destroyed without providing some proof that they have a significant place in the hearts of communities throughout New York City's diverse neighborhoods. This report is intended to corroborate what people living in neighborhoods throughout the Bronx, Queens, Brooklyn, Manhattan and Staten Island already know -- that community gardens cultivate more than plants, they cultivate communities.

New York City's Perspective

During 1997, twenty gardens were bulldozed and an unknown number of still operating

gardens have lost their leases to operate on city-owned land. Approximately 738 community gardens still in existence remain vulnerable to the City's policy to sell them to developers for housing or commercial development. They vary in size, but typically are less than one acre. They are leased by community groups and are located in neighborhoods throughout the five boroughs. Brooklyn has 358 gardens; Manhattan has 189; Bronx 154; Queens 33; and Staten Island 4. Several agencies have jurisdictional holds on the lots, including the Department of Parks & Recreation, the Department of Citywide Administrative Services, the Board of Education, and almost 50% are under the hold of the Department of Housing Preservation and Development (HPD). It is the gardens under the control of HPD that are in the most jeopardy because HPD has declared that there is a scarcity of available land on which needed affordable housing can be built. HPD's justification is that these parcels, by and large, once supported residential buildings that had since decayed and been demolished.

So, because housing existed there in the past, it is justifiable that housing be placed there again despite their interim use as gardens.

The City agency which administers the garden leasing program, "Green Thumb" has been directed to not renew or give out long-term leases; and instead, to move toward a one-year lease renewal policy. Actual gardens to be sold are not identified pursuant to any comprehensive land use plan. Rather the gardens are being sold off whenever a developer comes forth to develop that site, and not necessarily for housing. Some gardens are being replaced with stores. Undeniably, the sale of community gardens will raise short-term revenues for the City's coffers. But, this policy will also add more residents to neighborhoods already lacking sufficient open space and recreation opportunities. Housing and stores will be built at the expense of the profound contribution to quality of life that community gardens provide in already densely populated neighborhoods.

The City's plan to sell off parcels it classifies as "vacant" are actually oases of green spaces that were reclaimed from urban blight by community volunteers. Abandoned lots, strewn with debris and garbage, providing havens for crime, were transformed by sweat equity and pride into places of scenic beauty. These special spaces have won places in the hearts of the people who built them and use them. Their destruction will destroy more than some plants, trees, and benches. It will rip the heart out of the community and be forever a reminder of the heartlessness of the nameless, faceless government bureaucrat who can so easily turn a page, shuffle a file and so haplessly destroy a neighborhood's spirit.

Show Us the Plan

Many questions remain unanswered. Have all alternatives been honestly explored to expand housing opportunities, including renovating abandoned buildings and developing only truly vacant lots? Have citizens been involved in determining how the City should grow? Is there a plan? If so, does that plan recognize that locally accessible open space is desperately needed in the City? And that this is what people want? The State's Open Space Plan obviously does.

The State's Open Space Plan

New York State's Open Space Plan, first authorized in 1990, is the official document which guides the State's permanent open space goals and strategies. It identifies areas where there is a need for open space and identifies places which should receive priority status for

conservation. The Plan was developed by local advisory groups throughout the State and is an example of genuine grass roots involvement in policy development. The Plan's 1995 update recognized open space as critical to the quality of our lives..."affecting how we think about ourselves and relate to other New Yorkers." [Conserving Open Space 1995, p.1]

Specifically, it identified that the preservation of community gardens in New York City would provide equity for urban populations chronically and severely underserved by open space.

Small parcels of open space that are easily accessible to large numbers of people will have a greater value to the urban dweller than many acres of land that are not accessible. Lands, which in an urban area can be used for community gardens or neighborhood parks and open spaces, are as significant to the environmental health of city residents as areas in pristine environmental condition are to people in rural areas. Two thirds of the Community Planning Districts fall below the New York City standard of 2.5 acres per 1000 persons and are thus underserved by public open space. Approximately one half of the City's Community Planning Districts (29 of 59) have less than 1.5 acres per 1000 persons including most of Brooklyn, some of Manhattan, the Bronx and Queens. [Conserving Open Space 1995, p. 73]

The Plan prioritized community gardens for open space acquisition in New York City because they will provide equity for communities and neighborhoods underserved by open space. The Advisory Group for New York City further recommended a policy change to reflect that.

Equity for communities and neighborhoods underserved by open space should occur since an imbalance exists in New York City. Open space provided in other regions to serve the entire State may not be accessible for these citizens...even small parcels of open space that are easily accessible to large numbers of people will have a greater value to the urban dweller than many acres of land that are not accessible. It is imperative to provide local open space in New York City. A policy recommendation should be added to reflect this. [Conserving Open Space 1995, page 75]

In 1997 the Plan was updated and continued its recommendation to preserve community gardens as integral components of open space in New York City. The provision of open space in underserved areas was identified as a priority conservation strategy for Creating a Permanent Framework of Open Space. Specific strategies for New York City call for:

Continue partnerships with the City of New York and not-for-profit organizations to achieve neighborhood, citywide and regional open space conservation goals, including the purchase of community park land and other open space resources such as community gardens in densely populated underserved neighborhoods. [Conserving Open Space, 1997, p. 217]

Our Mission

It is not unusual for one level of government or even different offices within a governmental administration to be at odds with each other. It appears that Green Thumb, a program of the

City's Parks & Recreation Department, would like to preserve their program for all its innately good reasons; while the Department of Housing Preservation & Development is intent on adding affordable housing units in the City, certainly a laudable goal. But, depicting the problem as housing versus community gardens is short-sighted and fails to fully consider how important community gardens are to the fabric of the neighborhood and its quality of life. While it is undeniable that housing is needed, it can be accommodated without sacrificing the open space and neighborhood identity that community gardens provide. Given all the benefits that community gardens impart to community life, it seems that destruction of such places for housing should be the option of last resort. Rehabilitating old and often potentially lovely buildings, targeting development to truly abandoned lots, and renovating existing buildings to accommodate more families are other options.

It is our hope that this report will draw the attention of other State law-makers who, together with local groups, can help avert a tragic loss.

This report would not have been possible but for the help and support provided by caring people associated with the following groups:

Green Thumb, Neighborhood Open Space Coalition, Green Guerrillas, Trust for Public Land, and the 229 community gardeners who completed and mailed in our questionnaire.

"Never forget that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed this is the only thing that ever has."
Margaret Mead



Questionnaire Survey

Response Results

In September 1997, a questionnaire survey was mailed to a total of 763 community gardens in New York City. A contact name/address for each community garden was supplied by Green Thumb, the New York City agency that administers the community garden program. The mailing list contained all community gardens leasing land from the City as of August 20, 1997. The following chart describes the number of questionnaires which were mailed out, and the number and percent which responded. The responses were analyzed for each of the five boroughs and then summarized for New York City overall.

Questionnaires

City	Mailed	Returned	% Responding
Brooklyn	358	98	27%
Bronx	154	37	24%

Manhattan	189	77	41%
Queens	33	15	45%
Staten Island	4	2	50%
Total	738	229	31%

Survey Results

This section is organized according to the following format: First the exact question asked of respondents is identified, along with why that specific information was being sought. Finally there is a brief analysis of what the findings may imply.

Q1. "How Long Has Your Garden Been In Existence?"

Reason Asked

We were interested in finding out the length of time a community garden has been a part of the neighborhood. This information would help determine if it has become an established feature of the community.

Findings

- In the Bronx, the survey found that community gardens have been in existence on average 8.5 years with several gardens as old as 20 years.
- In Brooklyn there is at least one garden over 26 years old; with the average garden's age at 9.2 years.
- In Manhattan the average garden age was 8.5 years old with a few gardens as old as 20 years.
- Queens had a 20 year old garden while the average life span is 8.5 years.
- Staten Island's community gardens have an average life of 5 years.
- For New York City overall, community gardens have been in existence on average almost 9 years and most boroughs have gardens that have been around longer 20 years.

Implication

Throughout the five Boroughs, community gardens are a relatively stable feature in neighborhoods. It was not uncommon to find community gardens in existence for 20 or more years. It is reasonable to consider such gardens as integral to their respective neighborhoods' identities.

Q2. "What Is In Your Garden?"

Reason Asked

Question #2 sought information about what natural and man-made features are typically found within community garden spaces. While a general description may have been better, it was clearer to list items on the survey and ask the respondents to check off all that apply. The response choices included: vegetables, flowers, trees, sitting area, birds/butterflies, water features (e.g., ponds or fountains) and playgrounds. The respondents also had space to

identify features missed in the responses we had listed. All responses were tabulated in ranking order, except for the "other" category which was simply listed. The percent of gardens that ranked items similarly is also presented.

Findings

	Bronx	
Rank	Items Most Commonly Found in Gardens	Percent
1	vegetables, flowers (tied)	92%
2	trees	78
3	sitting areas	76
4	butterflies/birds	57
5	water features	16
6	playgrounds	13.5
Other:	summerhouse, bird bath, water barrels, brick path, barbecues and picnic tables	

	Brooklyn	
Rank	Items Most Commonly Found In Gardens	Percent
1	flowers	96%
2	vegetables	91
3	trees	87
4	sitting areas	85
5	birds/butterflies	54
6	playgrounds	19
7	water features	13
Other:	arbor, birdbaths, birdhouses, benches and tables, exhibition hall, outdoor classroom, compost bins and demonstration projects, exhibits, gazebo, wall mural, brick patio, amphitheater, community outreach projects, children's learning center, and veterans monuments: World War II, Korean War and Vietnam War.	

	Manhattan	
Rank	Items Most Commonly Found in Gardens	Percent
1	flowers	97%
2	trees	90

3	sitting areas	87
4	vegetables	84
5	birds/butterflies	66
6	playgrounds	25
7	water features (ponds, solar waterfalls)	21
Other:	barbecue pits, composters, fruit, stage, patios, children's plants, cabanas, sculptures, community center, picnic tables. amphitheater, swing sets, arbor, bird cages, beehive and honey, native american plants, and herb garden.	

Queens		
Rank	Items Most Commonly Found in Gardens	Percent
1	flowers	100%
2	trees	80
2	vegetables, sitting areas (tied)	73
3	birds/butterflies	53
4	playgrounds	13
5	water features	6.5
Other:	community center, rock and herb garden, pavilion, picnic tables and benches.	

Staten Island		
Rank	Items Most Commonly Found In Gardens	%
1	flowers, trees, sitting area, birds/butterflies (tied)	(100%)
2	water feature	(50%)
Other:	gazebo, purple martin colony, tree swallows.	

New York City Overall		
Rank	Items Most Commonly Found In Gardens	Percent
1	flowers	95%
2	vegetables	87
3	trees	85
4	sitting area	82.5
5	birds/butterflies	58
6	playgrounds	20

7	water features	16
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Implications Most community gardens provide park-like amenities not traditionally found in your typical back-yard vegetable garden. Flowers, trees, and sitting areas were found in more than 75% of all the community gardens throughout the five Boroughs.

Community gardens provide space for humans, animals and plant life. Sitting areas and playgrounds are quite common, accommodating human activity; while natural elements such as trees and water features attract both human and animals. These findings reveal that ecosystems evolve within community gardens. These ecosystems support vegetables that the neighborhood consumes.

The flowers and trees invite the smaller creatures like birds and butterflies. The inclusion of other species of life other than humans is a great benefit to a highly urban population.

Also, a large number of items were written-in by respondents to more fully describe the community gardens. These items reveal that community gardens are rich in diversity and individuality. They provide ample opportunities for accommodating cultural and social events. Items such as gazebos, picnic tables, barbecues, pavilions, and a summerhouses indicate the richness of social opportunities available in community gardens. Items such as exhibits, war memorials, murals, and amphitheaters reveal that community gardens serve as cultural centers as well.

Q3. "What Activities Occur In The Garden?"

Reason Asked

While gardens are expected to be spaces set aside primarily for plantings, we suspected that many other community-based activities were also taking place within these community-created special places. Answer choices were provided to the respondents and there was also a space for write-in answers. The following activities were listed to be checked if applying: friends meeting place, neighborhood gatherings, board games, nature education, recycling/composting, playground, child care, performance space, art classes, parties, weddings, sports/fitness/yoga, and religious activities. The responses were tabulated in ranking order, except that responses written in the "other" category were simply identified. Also the percent of gardens in each Borough which ranked the activity similarly is included.

Findings

Bronx		
Rank	of Most Common Activities	Percent of Gardens
1	Friends meeting place	81%
2	Neighborhood gatherings	78%
3	Nature education	57%
4	Recycling/composting	43%

5	Parties	38%
6	Board games	27%
7	Playgrounds	24%
8	Religious activities	16%
9	Weddings, Performance Space (tied)	13.5%
10	Art classes	11%
11	Sports/fitness/yoga	5%
12	Child care	3%
Other:	a place to relieve stress, senior citizens rest here, annual harvest festival, community service site for youth, botanical gardens for classes, and scenic tours.	

Brooklyn		
Rank	of Most Common Activities	Percent of Gardens
1	Friends meeting place	74.5%
2	Neighborhood gatherings	63
3	Recycling/composting	55
4	Nature education	52
5	Parties	34
6	Board games, Performance space (tied)	18
7	Art classes, Playground (tied)	17
8	Religious activities	11
9	Child care, Sports/fitness/yoga, Weddings (tied)	7
Other:	cultural events, student lunches and picnics, after school science clubs, summer barbecues, after school homework assistance, SYED site, chess tournaments, community activities, tutoring, bird habitat, gardening workshops, psychotherapy groups, summer youth programs, fruit picking, church, workshops, blockassociation meetings, fundraising.	

Manhattan		
Rank	of Most Common Activities	Percent
1	Friends meeting place	83%
2	Neighborhood gatherings	71

3	Nature education	61
4	Recycling/Composting, Parties (tied)	58
5	Performance Space	34
6	Religious activities	31
7	Art classes	32
8	Board games	27
9	Playground	26
10	Child care	25
11	Weddings	21
12	Sports/Fitness/Yoga	19
Other:	dog runs, workshops, school field trips, peace of mind, AA meetings, art exhibits, hummingbird club meetings, cooking, reading, relaxing, horticultural therapy program for mentally ill, little league meetings, storytelling, children's book exchange, baby clothes depot, senior nutrition programs, health fair, sanctuary, artists painting, summer camp, harvest festival, children's mural, memorial sections, garden tours, sculpture, school recess, outdoor classrooms, Headstart group visits, block association meetings, chinese culture group meetings.	

	Queens	
Rank	of Most Common Activities	Percent
1	Neighborhood gatherings	73%
2	Friends meeting place	67
3	Nature education	60
4	Recycling/composting	53
5	Playground, Parties (tied)	27
6	Art classes	20
7	Board games	13
8	Weddings/Religious Activities	6.7
Other:	youth mentoring, workshops, office meetings, solitude, concerts, neighborhood food distribution, education, wedding pictures.	

	Staten Island	
Rank	of Most Common Activities	Percent
1	Friends meeting place, Nature education	100%

2	Neighborhood gatherings, Performance space, Parties, Art classes, Recycling/composting.	50
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New York City Overall		
Rank	of Most Common Activities	Percent
1	Friends meeting place	78%
2	Neighborhood gatherings	69
3	Nature education	57
4	Recycling/composting	54
5	Parties	42
6	Board games	23
7	Art classes, Playground, Performance Space	22
8	Weddings	13
9	Child Care	12
10	Sports/Fitness/Yoga	10

Implications

Although vegetables and flowers are the most common features of community gardens, socialization, education, entertainment, and wholesome outdoor fun are also cultivated in community gardens. Clearly, community gardens are spaces where socialization is important, as most gardens identified themselves primarily as places to meet friends (#1) and hold neighborhood gatherings (#2). As such, they provide places where individuals can gather and identify together as residents of a neighborhood. This is exactly how a sense of community is created. The incidence of parties, board games, art classes, performance space, and playground activities also indicate that community gardens are places where life is enjoyed in the company of family, friends, and neighbors.

Community gardens also help bond people to the natural environment. In more than half the gardens responding, nature education (#3) and recycling/composting (#4) are significant activities. These findings indicate that a garden is not simply a place to plant vegetables and flowers and nurture their growth; but also a place to learn about the natural world and how humans can deal with their solid waste in an ecologically responsible manner. School classes are frequently held outdoors for the regular academic curriculum as well as a place to learn about the natural world.

Community gardens clearly uplift the quality of life for its members and neighborhood. The plethora of activities which respondents wrote-in on the questionnaire reveal a richness of activities at community gardens that far exceeded our expectations.

**Q4 "Is The Garden Seen From The Street?" And
Q5 "Does The Garden Add Scenic Beauty To The Neighborhood?"**

Reason Asked

The importance of a community garden to a neighborhood's identity is heightened when it can be seen from the street. Gardens that can be seen from the street may be a benefit to other residents in the neighborhood especially if it is perceived as adding scenic beauty to the neighborhood. People strolling by can also enjoy the visual amenity of a green space tucked away in an otherwise asphalt/concrete urban setting.

Findings

Of the total 126 gardens which responded to Q #4, all but 3 are seen from the street (2 in Queens and 1 in Manhattan). All respondents unanimously agreed that their community gardens add scenic beauty to the neighborhood.

Implications

Views of flowers and trees are not merely available to those who visit the garden, but garden views are possible for those who pass by the garden and even some people who may not be able to be near the garden but admire it from their apartment window, high up in the sky scraper. Community gardens provide an element of scenic beauty to neighborhoods; and city planners should consider community gardens as important visual amenities to urban streetscapes.

Q6 "How Many Garden Members Are There?"

Reason Asked

We hope to determine the size of the group that regularly works in the garden versus the number that may otherwise enjoy activities held in that space as evinced by Q8.

Findings

.	Bronx	Brooklyn	Manhattan	Queens	S.Is.
Range	2 - 600	1 - 1000	2 - 1200	4 - 30	.
Mode	10	10	12 and 25	12	6*
Median	15	20	27	12	.
Average	53	19	68	19	.

*Only 1 garden in Staten Island responded, indicating it had 6 garden members.

Implications

This question was obviously interpreted variously as to mean the actual number of gardeners as well as the numbers of people who may enjoy any of the activities held in the garden. Some people answered with the amount of people who actually work on the garden, or are on the board of directors for the garden, and some answered with the number of people who attend the garden for any of a host of activities which may not be directly related to gardening per se. The most accurate indicators of regular garden members may be the mode and median. They indicate that the number of regular garden members typically range from 10 to 20 with the largest memberships in Manhattan and the smallest in Queens.

Q7 "Where Do Garden Members Live?"

Reason Asked

Respondents were asked to indicate if members lived inside or outside the neighborhood, with the definition or scope of neighborhood left undefined. We were interested in determining if community gardens attracted members from beyond the immediate neighborhood. If so, perhaps it is because there are no gardens available in other areas.

Findings

Not all questionnaires had responses to this question. However, all that did indicated unanimously that garden members lived in the neighborhood. The percent of responding gardens that also had members residing outside the neighborhood are:

Bronx	17%
Manhattan	26%
Staten Is	50%
Brooklyn	27%
Queens	31%

Implications

A good percentage of the garden members live outside of the community. Not only do community gardens bring life to a neighborhood, but they can also serve as a vehicle to connect residents of different neighborhoods.

Q8 "Are There Other People Besides Garden Members Who Use The Garden?"

Reason Asked

The purpose of this question was to determine if people other than regular garden members enjoyed any of the amenities available in the gardens. This question is related to Q3 which asked about the activities that occur in community gardens. It is also implicated in the responses given to Q6 which indicated an extraordinarily high range of people who use the garden.

Findings

Not all respondents answered this question. The percentages are based on the number that did respond. The percentage of gardens indicating that other people also use the garden are:

Bronx	82%
Manhattan	85%
Staten Is	50%
Brooklyn	53%
Queens	80%

Implications

The high proportion of gardens that attract people to it other than regular garden members is consistent with the large diversity of activities that are done in community gardens. Community gardens are clearly not simply resources for cultivating plants.

Q9 "What Are The Ages Of The Persons Who Use The Garden?"
Q10 "What Are The Ethnic Backgrounds Of Persons Who Use The Garden?"

Reason Asked

We felt it was important to know if community gardens serve as communication bridges among age groups, races and ethnicities for people that might not otherwise get to know or like each other. We sought to find out if community gardens can promote harmony among young and old, and people of diverse race and ethnicity by participating in the community-based activities and events associated with community-created gardens. If so, such interactions can only enhance the quality of life in the community for all its residents and for the City of New York overall.

Age Group Findings

Respondents were given categories to check off, as follow: children under the age of 13, teens, adults, and seniors.

Percent Of Gardens With Ages Of Users

Age	Bronx	Brooklyn	Manhattan	Queens	SI
Under 13	67.5%	61%	82%	100%	100%
Teens	81	57	69	20	100
Adults	92	90	92	100	100
Seniors	81	85	91	93	100
All Age Groups	67.5	57	69	53	100

Ethnicity Findings

The response format was left blank for respondents to fill-in because of the disparity in the meaning of ethnicity labels. For example, latino and hispanic may or may not include similar sub-groups or nationalities. We counted the total number of ethnicities which were listed per Borough and found the following:

City	Total # Of Ethnicities Identified	Percent Of Gardens Listing More Than 1
Bronx	25	90%
Brooklyn	44	73
Manhattan	39	93
Queens	18	92
Staten Island	5	50

Ethnicities Identified

Bronx

Hispanic, Latin American, Latino, Spanish Speaking, Puerto Rican, Mexican,

Ecudoran, Dominicans, Cubans, African-American, Blacks, Africans, European, Irish, Spanish, Italian, Russian, Jewish, Polish, Asian, Pacific islanders, Chinese, Whites, Native Americans.

Brooklyn

White, Caucasian, Anglo-American, Catholics, Protestants, Agnostics, African-American, Black, People of Color, Hispanic, Spanish, Latino, South American, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, European, English, Italian, Polish, Irish, German, Russian, Eastern European, Jewish, Greek, Muslim, Pakistani, Indian, Africans, Guyanese, Nigeria, Egypt, Asian, Oriental, Chinese, Caribbean, Haitian, Jamaican, West Indies, Dominicans, Trinidad, St. Lucians.

Manhattan

White, Caucasian, Afro-American, Black Haitian, Caribbean, Barbados, Panamanian, Native American, Jewish, Canadian, Asian, Chinese, Indian, Bangladesh, Pacific Islanders, Korean, Bengals, Hispanic, Latino, Spanish-speaking, Cuban, Dominican, Mexican, Equatorian, Brazilian, European, German, Italian, Irish, French, Spanish, Eastern European, Northern European, Rumanian, Former USSR, Middle Eastern, Turkish.

Queens

African-American, People of color, Black, Caucasian, European, Greek, Irish, Asian, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Hindi, South Asian, Pakistani, Korean, Puerto-Rican, Hispanic, Latino.

Staten Island

Italian, White, Black, Hispanic, Korean.

Age and Ethnicity Implications

With the exception of one age group in Queens (teens), all age groups are represented in more than 50% of all the community gardens. In fact, more than half of all gardens indicated that all age groups used the gardens. Clearly, community gardens bring together people of all ages in projects and events that are not easily duplicated by other community facilities. This bridging of the age groups is essential for community harmony and may mitigate crime by one age group against others.

The ethnicity results clearly indicate that community gardens are melting pots; and as such, are essential to the harmony of the neighborhood and City. The number of ethnicities listed was astounding, with 24 in the Bronx, 44 in Brooklyn, 18 in Queens, and 5 in Staten Island. Overwhelming majorities of community gardens indicated that more than one distinct ethnic group regularly uses the garden. Surely, it would be hard pressed to identify any other neighborhood amenity which draws together such a diversity of people in pleasurable activities or events so close to home.

Q11 "How Many City Blocks Do You Consider As Your Neighborhood?"

Q12 "What Other Open Space Areas Are Available In Your Neighborhood?"

Reason Asked

These questions were linked because we attempted to find out how unique community gardens may be to neighborhoods and what alternatives may exist in the neighborhood for other types of experiences that are dependent upon the use of open space.

Findings

Neighborhood size is so varied that the answers to question 11 were too ambiguous and too meager for the findings to indicate anything conclusive. Thus, the results for Q11 were eliminated from this report.

For Q12, the questionnaire provided several answers and asked respondents to check all that apply. The choices included: playground, park, vacant lot, another community garden, private yards, none and other. There was also blank space for write-in answers.

Percent Of Community Gardens Located In Neighborhoods Having Other Open Spaces

.	Bronx	Brooklyn	Manhattan	Queens	Si
None	38%	14%	5.5%	7%	50%
Playground	54	54	57	53	50
Park	57	47	71	53	50
Vacant Lot	43	66	56	47	50
Another C.G.*	32	44	61	27	0
Private Yards	24	35	21	20	0
Other	5	5.5	12	0	0

*another community garden

Implications

A whopping 38% of Bronx respondents indicated that there were no alternative open spaces available in their neighborhoods. Any public decision to destroy community gardens in the Bronx should carefully examine whether opportunities exist for other open spaces in those neighborhoods. Other Boroughs fared better in terms of providing alternatives to community gardens. However, such alternatives as "vacant lots" and "private yards" are very poor substitutes for the rich experiences that take place in publicly accessible community gardens.

While we found that alternative community gardens exist in many neighborhoods, bear in mind that all community gardens on lands leased from the City of New York are vulnerable to being sold off. So this finding is relative to 1997. The availability of another community garden may disappear as time goes b y and more gardens are sold for housing or commercial development.

- Q 13 "Has Your Garden Been Identified For Destruction?"
- Q 14 "Have There Been Efforts Made By Your Community To Save It'S Garden?"

Reason asked

We were interested in determining the percent of respondents that were facing destruction of their garden and to see what kinds of efforts are being m ade to save community gardens by members whose gardens have been targeted for development as well as by those gardens not identified for destruction at this time.

Findings

In Bronx 14% of the responding gardens have been slated for destruction and 62% of the responding gardens indicated the community is trying to save the garden. In Brooklyn 11.5% said they have been identified for destruction, while 67.6% indicated they were involved in efforts to save their gardens. In Manhattan 17% of the gardens responding have been slated for destruction and 77% have made efforts to save community gardens. None of the Queens gardens have been slated for destruction and only community garden indicated it is making efforts to save community garden. In Staten Island, both respondents indicated that their gardens were not slated for destruction and one garden indicated it was involved in trying to save other community gardens from destruction.

Implications

The percent of gardens involved in saving community gardens far exceeds the number directly threatened at this time. Saving community gardens from destruction can be seen as a grass-roots movement because it engenders supports and activism from those not directly impacted at this time. These results are consistent with expectations because almost all gardens are vulnerable to being sold off by New York City. "Each year we are on tenterhooks to see if this will be our last year" (Oasis I, a community garden in Manhattan).

All community gardens identified for destruction were involved in trying to save community gardens. Activities listed for saving gardens included: community meetings, meeting with City Council members, Community Board members and Green Thumb; attendance at Land Use Subcommittee hearings, rallies at City Hall, letter writing campaign to the Mayor, parades, flyers, displaying photographs, circulating petitions, writing articles for newsletters and newspapers, being involved in a televised segment for local television programming, being in a video produced by Green Thumb, hosting garden celebration events, and joining a coalition organized by open space advocates.

Several affected gardens indicated they were sold without the groups' knowledge, so it was too late to do anything. The City informed a garden that the City could take it anytime and was not obligated to provide any advance notice. When garden members implored officials at Housing Preservation & Development, they were "met with deaf ears." One of the gardens sold off without prior warning to the community is the Bishop House/Urban Garden in Manhattan. This garden runs a program for adults with mental illness which teaches horticultural job skills. The garden is also used by Club United, which is a day program for adults with mental illness. One threatened garden in Brooklyn indicated it was partially saved as a smaller space only because the Borough President's office intervened to broker a deal. A few gardens indicated that they were "saved" after extenuating efforts were made. However, there is no clearly delineated public policy to determine which and how gardens can become permanent and protected from further threats to their existence.

Conclusion

Community gardens are more about "community" and less about "gardening." Descriptions reveal that they have unique physical features and reflect the individuality of their members. The wealth of activities and events taking place in gardens is enormously significant to engendering a sense of community among neighborhood residents. Far more people than regular garden members enjoy and use community garden spaces. Community gardens bring together people of all ages and ethnicities, as well as people residing in other neighborhoods. Moreover, community gardens are visual amenities in the neighborhood, as well as special places which host community-based activities.

Their diversity and richness cannot be easily substituted by alternative open spaces such as playgrounds or parks that have more structure, spatially and in terms of allowed uses. Community gardens are unique, community-created places; they are visible and vibrant examples of people investing their own time and resources where they live to transform blight into beauty. This spirit of community investment is reflected in the overwhelming effort that members are now engaged in to save their gardens. Their loss is tragic but avoidable.

The City's plan to sell off parcels it classifies as "vacant" are actually oases of green spaces that were reclaimed from urban blight by community volunteers. The rationale offered by the City is that there is a scarcity of available land on which needed affordable housing can be built. Undeniably, the sale of community gardens will raise short-term revenues for the City's coffers and add more residents to neighborhoods already severely underserved by open space and recreation opportunities. Housing will be built at the expense of the profound contribution to quality of life that community gardens provide to densely populated neighborhoods. The sweat equity and pride the community has invested in the effort to transform blight into beauty cannot so easily be replaced. These spaces have won places in the hearts of the people who built them and use them. Their destruction will destroy more than some plants, trees, and benches. It will rip the heart out of the community and be forever a reminder of the heartlessness of the nameless, faceless government bureaucrat who can so easily turn a page, shuffle a file, and so haplessly destroy a neighborhood's spirit.

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cityfarm@unixg.ubc.ca