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Letter from the Editor

By the end of the nineteenth century it became impossible to “keep ‘em down on the farm”; people began moving to cities where factory jobs and bright lights beckoned. A hundred years later, with four out of every five Americans living in metropolitan areas, the country was no longer an agrarian nation – a fact of momentous social consequence with a corresponding effect on the way in which people were fed.

The industrial revolution wasn't just a matter of the growth of manufacturing in and around cities. Machinery irrevocably changed the character of farming: the horse-drawn plow became the tractor, the wagon became the truck, the pitchfork became the harvester. The appearance of the landscape as well as the lives of farmers altered more dramatically over a couple of generations than in all the preceding millennia that human beings had been growing crops. Dams made possible not only hydroelectricity but also the irrigation of arid lands. Machine farming meant much larger fields. The interstate high-

way system stitched together hinterland and metropolis, making long-distance trucking to and from multiple delivery points possible.

So what is there not to celebrate about much bigger harvests and the liberation of the 20 percent of the population who remained on the farm from a legacy of drudgery? Isn't abundance a byword for the American way of life? And shouldn't we take into consideration the fact that the export of grain and other surplus crops is good for the balance of trade?

Throughout the twentieth century the cornucopia produced by industrial agriculture was poured out on the table in millions of American homes. But this cornucopia was not made up simply of fresh food. Freezers were another of industry's gifts to the kitchen, and even before mothers went out into the workplace, they served frozen foods for dinner. Before long, entire frozen meals could be eaten in front of the television. Moreover, after large-scale agriculture was put in the service of the fast-food industry, you no longer even had to eat at home. Catering to the specifications of McDonald's, many potato growers concentrated solely on the most suitable variety for making french fries.

Corn was grown in unprecedented quantities to provide oil, sweeteners, and feed for the cattle that would enter the human food chain as hamburgers sold by fast-food franchises. Profitable junk foods filled entire supermarket aisles.

The seeds of reaction to industrial agriculture were planted in 1962 by Rachel Carson with the publication of *Silent Spring*. In the book, Carson called attention to the dangers lurking in the arsenal of chemical weapons that had been developed to control pests and improve yields. The seeds she sowed began to sprout in 1970 with the first Earth Day and the burgeoning of the environmental movement. Documentation of the poisonous effect of agricultural chemicals on animals and birds, as well as their danger to humans when consumed in food and drinking water, helped activists build the case for environmental controls. But none of this at first had much effect on changing the easygoing dietary habits of the majority of the American public.

But then in 1971, not long after Julia Child had awakened the taste buds of Americans to the joys of French cooking, Alice Waters, now widely considered the mother of the fresh-food movement, opened her restaurant Chez Panisse in

Berkeley, California. More than a restaurant, it became the prototype of the new American cuisine. Other restaurants in other cities followed suit, and their menus, like that of Chez Panisse, began to detail the provenance of baby lettuces, goat cheese, lamb, figs, and so on. Waters was not only hailed as the pioneer of a simpler native gastronomy but also as the originator of what some now refer to as the locavore ideal, whose proponents maintain that locally grown meat, dairy products, vegetables, and fruits taste better and are healthier for you than those you buy in the supermarket.

Not surprisingly, in cities the philosophy of locally grown food hit the street – literally – with the proliferation of farmers' markets in numerous communities across the country. Bringing the farm stand to the city is a good two-way deal: it provides truck farmers within a two-hour driving radius of a city with a consumer base and urban dwellers with a means of bonding with their rural neighbors (not to mention their immediate urban neighbors) on market days.

Propelled by an environmental movement calling for pesticide-free produce, the word “organic” entered the food vocabulary. Chemical-free food gained popularity among a broader spectrum of food shoppers than those who already subscribed to farmers' market ethic. In the

produce sections of supermarkets a two-tiered offering of fruit and vegetables has become common. In places like Whole Foods – the ecosavvy fresh food emporium that has fanned out from its home base in Austin, Texas, to many other parts of the country – there are “conventionally grown” and “certified organic” labels on everything from avocados to zucchini.

But just because it was grown without chemical assistance doesn't mean that an organic blueberry isn't as much a product of the industrial agricultural system as a conventional one, for organic and local are not necessarily the same thing. With sufficient consumer demand and willingness to pay higher prices for organic produce, commercial corporations now have a profitable market capable of absorbing the costs of long-distance transportation. A case in point: Earthbound Farms in Carmel, California, presents a local-farm-stand face on its website, but the triple-washed, field-fresh container of baby arugula in my New York refrigerator has been shipped cross-country, raising in my mind the question of how to measure the carbon footprint of the tasty salad that is coming to me on a refrigerated truck traversing a continent.

This brings us back to Alice Waters, whose philoso-

phy is based on “the principle that access to sustainable, fresh, and seasonal food is a right, not a privilege.” The Edible Schoolyard (ESY) program sponsored by her Chez Panisse Foundation originated at the Martin Luther King Middle School in Berkeley and now has affiliated programs in New Orleans, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Greensboro, and Brooklyn. Aimed at combating the junk-food craze, it integrates learning in the school garden with learning inside the school. As part of the ESY curriculum, students cook their garden produce in the kitchen classroom. Such things as scaling down recipes are presented as math problems. However, although part of its mission is directed toward school-lunch reform, cafeteria lunches are still prepared in the same way as before. The hope is, however, that schoolchildren whose palates have been exposed to fresh flavors will expand their dietary repertoire and eat healthier food outside school and at home.

Hidden in the implicit question of why school-grown food is not served in the school cafeteria is a conundrum. It is one of scale. Feeding the American population of over 310 million is dependent on large-scale agriculture as well as food imports from other countries. The conundrum is one of economics, too. Consumers vote with their

dollars and their food stamps. The pricing of locally grown food has to equate with the financial sustainability of small farms, and herein lies the rub. As in the case of all handcrafted objects, individually planted, handpicked foods cannot underprice those of industrial mass production.

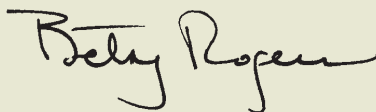
Thus Michelle Obama's White House organic vegetable garden may point the way back to the victory gardens of World War II, but it is more symbolic than catalytic. Yet the symbolic importance of this small, highly visible piece of the green revolution shouldn't be underestimated. Like Waters's school gardens it poses a tangible alternative to the industrial model of food production while broadcasting by example the First Lady's message that home-grown means healthier eating.

It should not be forgotten, moreover, that gardens are landscapes, not abstractions, and their growing presence in cities is all of a piece with other greening efforts: turning abandoned industrial sites into parks; riverbanks into bikeways and promenades; and streets into tree-lined thoroughfares. Call it the new city planning, this loosening of the urban weave with a reborn landscape of parks, promenades, trees, and community gar-

dens is beginning to dissolve the dichotomy between rural and urban scenery.

In this issue of *Site/Lines* Jane Roy Brown takes us to Harvard Yard to see how student gardeners are growing vegetables in the heart of Cambridge; Katherine Harmon visits school gardens in Brooklyn; Jane Garmey elevates us to the rooftops of Manhattan to discover hives for honey bees and specialty foods for chefs; Timothy Beatley describes a visionary blueprint for turning Detroit's desolate lots into a large urban-farming operation; and Benjamin Helphand and Laura Lawson speak of the role community gardens play in the local-food movement in Chicago. In and of themselves none of these things will alter the current pattern of national agriculture, but they may be, especially when multiplied by thousands of other examples elsewhere, a powerful force in changing our cultural ethos regarding food production and consumption. It is important to remember that even in the age of globalization, we are all locals wherever we are at any given time. Why not then be locavores as well?

With good green wishes,



Elizabeth Barlow Rogers
President

Cities Going Green, The Urban Landscape as Food

Inventing the New Urban Farm: Field Notes From Detroit

Few American cities have fallen as far or as hard as Detroit. Once the fourth largest city in the country, an iconic example of American ingenuity and productivity, over the last half century it became instead an emblem of cronyism, corruption, and despair. The population, once close to two million, now hovers at around half that. Unemployment is at 14 percent. A *Time* article in 2009 cited the median home sale price at less than \$6,000 – and no one was buying. Today, roughly a third of the city's acreage lies vacant – about forty square miles. And yet even these statistics don't fully prepare a visitor for the extent of the devastation. Driving around Detroit, one sees large empty spaces that once contained entire neighborhoods and commercial strips reminiscent of battle-scarred Iraq or Lebanon. Many homes and businesses have been deliberately set on fire; others are crumbling to the ground.

These ruins are punctuated by relics of an earlier, more vibrant time, when the automobile literally defined Motor City. Here, still, are the enormous factories, the Edsel Ford Expressway, the twelve-ton, eighty-foot tire looming over the highway near the airport. But unfortunately, despite the recent positive economic bulletins from General Motors and Ford, it is nature rather than industry that appears to be reshaping the city, as lawns grow wild and bushes invade the houses they once ornamented. On the east side of town, where the decline has been greatest, pheasants have become a common sight. Some, however, see in nature's regenerative force not the destruction of Detroit's past but the key to its future. Both business leaders and government officials are exploring city farming on a grand scale as a serious possibility.

In fact, urban agriculture has come to Detroit's aid before, as today's farming proponents are quick to point out. When its inhabitants were battling hunger and poverty during the depression of the 1890s, the city's progressive mayor, Hazen S. Pingree, instituted the use of vacant lots for gardens. The gardens became known as "Pingree's potato patches," and by all accounts they were quite successful, feeding many in desperate times. At the height of the program some seventeen hundred families farmed half-acre plots, producing food for both sale and family consumption. Laura Lawson, in her excellent book



Much of the east side of Detroit is a mix of abandoned houses and vacant lots. Some 40 square miles of vacant land exists in the city, offering new opportunities for food production as well as the restoration of natural habitats.

City Bountiful, describes how the Pingree program was emulated in other cities, including New York and Philadelphia.

One of the reasons that urban agriculture is being viewed as an appealing possibility is that, for the time

being, the city's aim is not to repopulate its dwindling neighborhoods but to depopulate them even further. Mayor Dave Bing has introduced a bold master plan called Detroit Works, which will identify existing population clusters in the city and then densify and reinvest in those areas – essentially giving up on areas that don't appear to be socially or economically viable in the short run. This idea has been controversial, as some residents are afraid that they will be forced to relocate, but doing nothing to address Detroit's shrinking population is not an option. With a crippled tax base, the city simply can't afford to protect its remaining citizens and supply them with basic services like water and road repair. By one estimate, each vacant lot costs the city about \$2,400 per year in public services and maintenance – an annual bill in the hundreds of millions and a major reason for the city's operating deficits.

As many neighborhoods continue to empty, and as Detroit Works speeds this process along, there are remarkable opportunities to repurpose the vacant swaths of this city, and perhaps more than in any other American city today, urban

agriculture is poised to be a catalyst for renewal and reuse. At the same time, there is considerable angst about how Detroit's food-growing potential should be exploited, and competing models and perspectives have emerged. At one end of the continuum is a proposal by local millionaire John Hantz to transform large areas of the city into intensive and commercially viable farms. This proposal has captured the imagination of many outside of Detroit and received considerable national press coverage. Hantz, with a net worth of some \$100 million, has made a personal commitment to invest \$30 million in commercial urban farming in Detroit over the next ten years – a pledge that has given him immediate credibility. He is seen as a native son whose ideas should be taken seriously.

Hantz has described his depressing daily commute from his home in Indian Village to his Southfield office in numerous interviews. "I'd look out the window," he told a staff editor at *The Atlantic*, "and I'd tell myself, something has to happen. Something has to change. One day I was sitting at a traffic light, thinking this through from an economics point of view, and I thought, 'What's our problem? Why doesn't it get better?' Well, we have multiple problems, but one comes down to real estate. We don't have scarcity." There is too much available land in Detroit, so nobody wants it. "We need to create scarcity," Hantz reasoned, "because until we get a stabilized market, there's no reason for entrepreneurs or other people to start buying. I thought, 'What could do that in a positive way? What's a development that people would want to be associated with?'" And that's when he came up with the idea of farming: a business enterprise that takes up a great deal of space. "People often think you have to have a big solution to a big problem – why not keep it simple and start with a simple solution?" And so he founded Hantz Farms, LLC, and hired Mike Score as its president.

Score was a good choice. He grew up in Detroit and attended Michigan State University (MSU), where he obtained a degree in crop and soil sciences; it turned out that for many years he, too, had harbored a dream of converting some of the city's vacant acreage into farmland. After a stint working on agricultural development in Zaire and another teaching in Kentucky, where he received his master's degree, he returned to MSU to work at its extension service as an innovation counselor. It was there, while helping fledgling entrepreneurs develop business plans for new food businesses and products, that he met Hantz. After he helped the entrepreneur come up with a financial plan, Hantz offered him a job.



Mike Score is president of Hantz Farms LLC, and is spearheading efforts to bring large-scale commercial farming to Detroit. Here, he and the author visit the site of the "proof of concept" farm, on the east side of the city.

to cobble together lots – most now owned by the city as a result of foreclosure – that Hantz Farms is negotiating to buy. Nevertheless, assembling a viable farm in an area that would still include hundreds of individual lot owners remains a challenge. Although we drove by large, empty parcels of land, the checkerboard pattern of Score's site map indicated that a considerable number of local residents are expected to stay put. In fact, the Hantz Farm staff began its efforts by going door to door in the neighborhood to explain what they were envisioning, and that no one would be forcibly evicted. Score claims that local support has been high, with some 95 percent of the residents signing a petition that will eventually be presented to City Council, asking them to approve the sale of the city-owned parcels. Score believes that over time similar "pods" of large-scale agriculture could be established around the city, eventually resulting in perhaps five thousand to ten thousand acres in commercial production.

What kinds of commercial farming are imagined? Score talks in terms of stages, beginning with somewhat easier and more familiar strategies. The first would probably include

hardwood trees (an especially good option if significant soil contamination is discovered), apple trees and other fruit trees, and even pick-your-own Christmas trees, along with field crops like lettuce and heirloom tomatoes. A second phase would include more intensive indoor production, including the notion of an innovation center demonstrating many different indoor production systems. Score maintains that just about every new farming idea will be on display and tested – aquaculture, aquaponics, aeroponics – and that many of these technologies will probably be designed in vertical shapes to take up less space. Education and tourism would be added to the mix, targeting students of all ages, senior citizens, and community organizations.

The third phase, which would be the most ambitious, would invest in renewable-energy technologies to power all of this pro-

duction sustainably. Although Hantz Farms is a commercial enterprise, its founder believes that it can also serve to educate others and draw tourists to Detroit. Indeed, at several points in our conversation, Score mentioned the possibility that people from around the world might one day come there not to celebrate the city's automotive past but to learn about leading urban-farming ideas and technologies. "We believe we can be a global center for research and innovation in urban agriculture and we can give birth to a new industry," he explained. Score and Hantz would like to see a time in the near future when, in one trip, a visitor could learn about soil remediation, compare and contrast different growing systems, and observe the sociological impact of integrating agriculture into an urban setting. In this scenario, Score says, "many of the lessons that will be of interest to urban planners and urban leaders could be addressed by traveling to Detroit."

We have no model in the United States for what such an immensely ambitious agricultural project might look like. "Don't think a farm with tractors," Hantz has said. "That's old." When *Fortune* magazine did a story on the project in 2009, the editors asked if they could commission an illustrator to imagine such a landscape. The result was whimsical and conceptual – multiple elevated growing beds, geodesic-dome greenhouses, and wind turbines – but not that far from Score's own conception of the future.

There have been frustrations, Score admits, and many hurdles remain. The city has shifted the projected site of the farm several times. And there remains uncertainty about the legal status of commercial farming in the city (there is currently no agricultural zone or category under the city's zoning ordinance). Discussions about the necessity of extending the state's right-to-farm law within the city's boundaries are ongoing. But resources and capital to get started, which are so often the major stumbling blocks, do not appear to be issues in this case.

Some city residents are leery of the Hantz proposal, fearing that it is motivated by profit and opportunism, and referring to Hantz's efforts to buy the city's foreclosed properties as a land grab. Ironically, Hantz Farms may be most vocally resisted by those who are already involved in producing food within the city limits. By one estimate, there are more than one thousand small gardens now operating in Detroit, and their supporters represent a dramatically different philosophy and practice of urban agriculture. One of them is Dr. Kami Pothukuchi, who teaches in the urban studies and planning program at Wayne State University. In Pothukuchi's view, the Hantz proposal has suffered from the beginning from a failure to connect with the city's robust and growing urban agriculture movement.

Pothukuchi would like to see many more small gardens scattered throughout the city rather than the development of one big, privately owned enterprise. During our meeting, she emphasized the many benefits of community gardens, and the profound ways in which they help to strengthen neighborhoods. Hantz, she argued, sees his project merely as a "convenient use of land," whereas "people who are in urban agriculture talk about the possibility of abundance, about sharing, about all the multiple community benefits that can be obtained from agriculture – involving young people and inspiring neighborhoods."

There is no question that Detroit suffers from a disintegrating and dysfunctional community food system; there are many places on Detroit's east side where residents have no easy access to a grocery store. The commercial establishments that remain in these neighborhoods are often liquor stores or tiny convenience shops. Pothukuchi has developed a program called Detroit FRESH to help the owners of these stores stock at least some fresh fruits and vegetables for their customers. Pothukuchi took me to one such store – a little market on Mack Avenue, where the owners are proud that they have resisted the alienating trend of installing bulletproof glass to shield themselves from their customers. This store already offers more foodstuffs than most, but front and center, I noticed, were bananas and apples and pears.

For Pothukuchi, this is just a beginning; she and the owner discussed plans already under way to establish a garden on an adjacent empty lot, which could then provide the store with extremely fresh produce during the growing season. Pothukuchi also mentioned the possibility of organizing a special event to counsel nearby residents suffering from diabetes, and the store owner seemed interested in participating. Lots of small-scale efforts such as these are in progress throughout the city, and increasingly they identify themselves as part of a larger movement. Many of the gardens are connected by the Detroit Garden Resource Collaborative, a joint effort of The Greening of Detroit, Detroit Agriculture Network, Earthworks Urban Farm, and Michigan State University. These organizations provide technical support, training, and planting materials to representatives of the hundreds of individual gardens scattered around Detroit. In so doing, they also nourish a network of community activists who are, in their own ways, building a different kind of city.

One impressive example of urban farming of a different sort can be seen at Earthworks Urban Farm, which was started by a Franciscan brother in 1997 to provide food for the Capuchin Soup Kitchen. A member of the collaborative, Earthworks Farm has blossomed into a hub of urban gardening activity. Its greenhouse now produces some one hundred thousand vegetable seedlings, many of which are donated to other community gardening efforts around the city. On the day I visited, Patrick Crouch, program manager for the farm, was busy laying out a passive solar hoop house that will expand the production and training space even further. Earthworks maintains more than thirty beehives and produces honey and beeswax hand balm in addition to jam and canned foods. It also runs two youth-farming ini-

Kami Pothukuchi is a professor at Wayne State University and believes the future lies in smaller, neighborhood-based urban agriculture. Here, she and the author visit one of the greenhouses run by Earthworks Urban Farm.

tiatives, which teach kids about food and agricultural issues. The farm is a highly grassroots, neighborhood- and community-embedded venture, and it exists to combat poverty, social equity, and food insecurity. These are goals and objectives not often mentioned when the Hantz Farms proposal is described, and therein lies part of the schism that has emerged in the Detroit urban-farming community.

In some ways, this seems a predictable clash of values. Hantz is a businessman. He has a diversified portfolio that includes ownership of a corporate airline, a bowling alley, a bank, and a lot of real estate. This latest venture has been from the beginning a commercial one – Hantz's civic concerns about the health of his native city notwithstanding. This is one of the reasons that Score objects strongly to criticisms that Hantz did not reach out sufficiently to the city's urban-gardening community. "John's perspective is a business perspective," Score said. "When Apple wanted to build their desktop computers they didn't go to IBM and say, 'You were here first – would it be all right with you if we put this in the marketplace?' They took millions of dollars and put it at risk, and if the market doesn't like the idea the business will fail. For John, he never felt compelled to sit down with other groups in the city and find out whether they liked his idea. He was just

willing to put his money at risk and see how the market responded." Score believes that the commercial marketplace must be the primary catalytic force that moves the city forward.

Part of the resistance to the Hantz proposal is certainly due to the immense amount of national publicity Hantz has received when smaller-scale urban agriculturalists have been working in the trenches for decade or longer with little recognition. But it also stems from the scope of the project, and the difficulty of anticipating its negative consequences before it will be too late to prevent them. In fairness to Hantz's detractors, corporations rarely feel beholden to the communities in which they do business, whereas for Pothukuchi and others in Detroit's urban gardening movement, it is the neighborhood and the community that must be the primary point of focus. As Patrick Crouch told one reporter, smaller farms "fit within the fabric of a neighbor-



hood,” whereas a large operation like Hantz Farm becomes “a substitute for community redevelopment instead of being a catalyst for community redevelopment.” And as John Gallagher, a longtime reporter for the *Detroit Free Press*, points out in his recent book, *Reimagining Detroit*, there are many reasons urban farmers might feel suspicious of corporate power and influence – “because the banks and big business redlined Detroit and other cities, or because of the horror stories they hear about the way corporate farmers treat livestock, or because of the intensive use of pesticides and other chemicals corporate farmers use to make huge single-crop farms profitable.”

How irreconcilable are these competing visions of a greener Detroit? Score believes that there is plenty of room in Detroit for both of them. Certainly, the city bureaucracy has been galvanized to develop an institutional framework supportive of urban agriculture. A committee appointed by the

One of the garden sites at Earthworks Urban Farm. This farm serves as an important hub for small-scale neighborhood gardening and food production in Detroit.

city planning commission is drafting a new urban agriculture policy and looking carefully at the code and zoning changes that are needed, including provisions for keep-

ing poultry and bees in the city – activities which are currently illegal. A food policy council has also been formed. Perhaps these new urban food initiatives will create opportunities for the various constituencies to speak and work together. With an extension of good will from both sides, it might also be possible to craft synergies to advance neighborhood cohesion and community food security as well as larger-scale economic food production, but whether that good will is forthcoming remains to be seen.

Hazen Pingree’s statue now sits in Grand Circus Park, and although most residents probably could not identify this figure, who later served two terms as governor of Michigan, he is an important historical reference point for Detroit’s supporters of urban agriculture. It is interesting to ponder what Pingree would have thought about the rift between the neighborhood gardeners and the proponents of larger-scale, commercial farms in the city. The potato-patch gardens were rather small, to be sure, and born out of concerns about justice and poverty and health. As Melvin G. Hollis, in his comprehensive book about the reformer notes, a main goal of the program was to “eliminate the stigma of pauperism attached to [public] relief.” Give the poor the skills, material, and land, and they, even in cities, will feed themselves. But then again, Pin-

gree was himself a Republican, albeit a progressive one, and the owner of a shoe factory, so one could imagine that he might approve of the capitalist sensibilities behind Hantz’s vision. My guess is that Pingree would certainly approve of a government agricultural policy that accommodated a spectrum of philosophies and approaches: both small-scale and large-scale, local and corporate. The one thing that all sides agree upon is that Detroit needs a diversified and resilient mix of food producers and production systems.



Perhaps most exciting is the possibility for Detroit that John Gallagher suggests in his book – that his hometown might emerge as an example of how other American cities can adapt themselves to a postindustrial (postcarbon) identity in the twenty-first century. There is room to restore nature, to explore new economic models, and, ironically, to create the conditions for a less car-dependent society. Especially intriguing are current arguments for an ambitious greening agenda: more trees and forests – something the local group the Greening of Detroit has already been working on for years; more stream restoration and native hydrology; and a celebration of the returning wildlife, such as the beavers that have apparently moved back into town after many decades. To embrace these possibilities, however, Americans must begin by realizing that smaller need not mean lesser but instead can signal a sustainable, innovative city with a higher quality of life. As Gallagher reminds us, “a city can shrink and grow at the same time.” – Timothy Beatley

The Culture of Food and Chicago’s Community Gardens

America is in the midst of a food crisis. The number of obese children in this country has tripled in the last thirty years. Hundreds of thousands live in so-called food deserts, neighborhoods with limited access to supermarkets or other sources of healthy food. Food pantries are faced with higher demand and declining donations. Fresh produce is prohibitively expensive for many and often loaded with pesticides. And our current food system is inextricably linked to our dependence upon fossil fuels: the average meal travels fifteen hundred miles to our plate.

Partly in response to this crisis, interest in community gardens has blossomed in cities across the country. Longtime organizations that support gardens, from the Boston Natural Areas Network and Denver Urban Gardens to Seattle’s P-Patch and New York City’s GreenThumb, have noted an increased demand for garden space. And newer organizations have taken root in places like the Twin Cities, Pittsburgh, and Salt Lake City, breathing new life into unused properties. City parks and recreation departments are setting aside corners of parkland for gardening, and churches, hospitals and schools are reimagining institutional land as a place for vegetable plots.

Though some garden projects are purely ornamental or focused on restoring animal habitat, most are conceived as a response to some aspect of the food crisis. Community gardens are established with the promise of saving money, feeding the hungry, and relieving food deserts. What’s more, the locally grown food they provide needs only travel down the block, not across the country.

Our habit of turning to community gardening in times of crisis is not new. As a society, America has embraced the idea of community gardens

Roosevelt, Daniel, and Quincy, youths from the South Chicago Art Center, harvest from the Artists' Garden hoop house.

ever since it became an industrialized, urban nation – especially during times of war, depression, or urban decline. When life gets crazy, we go to the garden. Economic relief is usually a major goal, but community gardens are often intended to address other large, societal concerns as well: nutrition, health, education, job training, and beautification.

Until quite recently, these efforts were organized from the top down. During the 1893 to 1897 depression, municipalities in Detroit, Chicago, New York, and other cities worked with local charities to found vacant-lot cultivation associations so that unemployed laborers could grow and sell food. At the same time, educational organizations and women's clubs were establishing school gardens and civic gardening campaigns to educate citizenry and beautify neighborhoods. During the Great Depression, churches, charities, and eventually governmental agencies established subsistence and work-relief gardens to occupy the unemployed and improve nutrition, and similar efforts were undertaken during both world wars.

Only in the 1970s did community gardens acquire the grassroots aura that they hold for many today. Confronted with urban decay and inspired by an era of civil-rights activism, city dwellers began appropriating abandoned lots and growing produce and flowers in them. The notion that a community could organize and take control of its surroundings became increasingly popular. As with the earlier plots, however, these gardens were founded not with an eye to the long term but as a temporary response to dying neighborhoods.

During each incarnation, organizers proclaimed great outcomes – immigrants who gained new skills, children who ate the food they grew, stronger communities, reclaimed land. Today's community gardening advocates often explicitly invoke this history: a statistic that 40 percent of the food supply was provided by urban gardens during World War II is repeated as a kind of mantra, implying that if Americans could do it in the past, then we can do it now. What is less discussed is that almost none of these earlier efforts survived; when the crisis passed, so too did widespread interest in – and institu-



tional support for – urban gardening. By squarely facing the benefits and limits of today's community gardens in addressing our food needs, perhaps we can better guarantee their survival over time.

Community gardens can't feed us. They can't even feed those who garden them, never mind the surrounding community. In order for a community to actually live off of a garden it would need a lot of space and a considerable investment in specialized equipment and training – to say nothing of a great deal of backbreaking labor. Community gardens generally don't have enough of any of these things – and most wouldn't want them. Instead, community gardeners are content to toil on their four-by-eight or fifteen-by-fifteen-foot plot, get their hands dirty on weekends and summer evenings, and share tools with their fellow gardeners. To be sure, they take immense pride in their modest harvest, whether they are supplementing their kitchens with fresh food in season or donating some to friends or charities. But that is only part of the satisfaction these gardeners derive from their efforts.

Cynics who question community gardening as food production will cite the "\$5 tomato" phenomenon – the novice gardener who enthusiastically buys all the tools, soil amendments, and fancy trellises to grow one tomato plant. In terms of time spent and money invested, they argue, it simply doesn't balance out. At the other end of the spectrum, champions of community gardening for food can point to recent

studies that have found that community gardens in Philadelphia, Camden, and Trenton have produced millions of dollars' worth of summer vegetables. Limiting one's view to the market value, however, would be to miss the garden for the carrots, so to speak. The same harvest reports reveal that much of the power of these gardens stems not from their yield but from the culture they nourish; the personal relationships that undergird the distribution systems where people have staked out direct control of their food supply. And certainly the grower of the \$5 tomato is less likely to be motivated by the bottom line than by a yearning to grow something he can eat – and to eat something he has grown.

Every Saturday morning in the Uptown neighborhood of Chicago's North Side, a handful of volunteers gather freshly harvested vegetables, fruits, herbs, and flowers

and load them onto a bicycle trailer for the several-mile-long journey to Vital Bridges' GroceryLand, a food pantry for low-income people living with HIV/AIDS. The volunteers usually include a mix of seasoned gardeners, curious newcomers, and a group from a local university. Each year Ginkgo Organic Garden, which is named for the large tree near its entrance, donates about fifteen hundred pounds of produce to the food pantry, providing high-quality, organic food to a population on a limited income for whom a nutritious diet is essential.

While recognizing the contribution of this donated produce, it is important to keep it in perspective. A garden leader from Ginkgo once recounted being teased about the yield by a farmer, because for him it seemed so tiny. But the leader was unfazed because he sees the garden as providing a service for those who grow its produce as well as those who consume it. Ginkgo hosts hundreds of volunteers each season, and for many this is their only direct connection to food growing and nature. Each workday ends the same way: a group photo in homage to Grant Wood's famous painting *American Gothic*, with one lucky volunteer holding the iconic pitchfork in hand. While some of the harvest certainly finds its way home with volunteers, this garden is about service to others, not growing your own lettuce. (In its early days, in fact, Ginkgo had a

portion of the garden set aside for personal plots, but these were soon converted to the current communal beds due to

lack of interest.) In addition to producing food, Ginkgo provides a number of other needs for its community. It is a space for performances, hosting poetry readings and outdoor theater. The front of the garden, with its path and shady sitting area, doubles as a small neighborhood park. It has even become a laboratory, serving as a research site to study bees and other plant pollinators.

Having been founded in 1994, Ginkgo is pretty old for a community garden. It enjoys a permanency and support most gardens only dream of. Its land is protected by NeighborSpace, a nonprofit land trust that also provides liability insurance and maintains a dedicated water source. In its seventeen years of existence, Ginkgo has built up a strong organization that can raise money and oversee the steady stream of volunteers. Its supporters have had the time and the resources to fine-tune the garden, installing an arched, wrought-iron gate; a shed that is now covered with vines; espaliered fruit trees; and, most recently, a flagstone patio in the shade.

Most gardens are not so fortunate. Just south of Ginkgo is one that clings to the side of a commuter rail line. The land is slated for a train stop, so the future of this particular garden is very uncertain. It has neither fence nor sign, and the gardeners must draw their water from a neighboring public-housing complex. The site is an abstract quilt of plots that suggests a range of origins and expertise among its cultivators: lettuce in rows here, squash overgrowing the paths there, Thai basil in a neat triangle bounded by carpet scraps. Bean vines climb up electrical lines and an American flag flutters nearby.

The site, which has been cultivated for about fifteen years, is locally referred to as the Seniors' Garden. Most of the plots are tended by older Asian and Russian immigrants who live close by in public housing. The food grown here is not to give away or to sell: it is grown for personal consumption. There are no volunteer groups coming to help, no public events that invite the broader community to come to the garden. On a recent visit, one of this piece's authors was lectured by an elderly gardener in a language he didn't understand, but the mimed message was very clear: "I worked this land, planted the seeds, and tended the crops. These are mine and not yours."

While it is unknown exactly how much food is produced at the Seniors' Garden, it is clear that none of these gardeners are subsisting on what's grown here. They are, however, able to significantly supplement their kitchens during the relatively

Artists' Garden site in 2003, before it was developed (see front cover for Artists' Garden in 2010).



short Chicago growing season. And some are able to grow foods particularly meaningful to their culture – foods that otherwise may not be easily available to them. Gardening can provide immigrants from agrarian societies with a visceral connection with their home country. A gardener at a nearby garden that hosts a Nepali immigrant community explained, "The land is our humanity – when you can dig into the soil it is a reassurance. . . the earth is part of our home and is part of where you come from."

Perhaps equally important, the garden provides hours of companionship, purposeful activity, and light exercise for a group of individuals who might otherwise be alone in their apartments. The preciousness of this precarious space is obvious in its gardeners' loyalty to it, even though they've been told the soil is probably contaminated. That disturbing fact appears to be less important than the threat of not being able to garden. Fortunately, a couple of neighborhood activists and sympathetic politicians are working quietly to find alternative gardening locations in advance of the garden's inevitable displacement.

Most community gardens supply multiple food functions – food to donate, food for personal consumption, food to sell, food to eat together, food to learn from. On Chicago's Far Southeast Side, what many call simply "the garden" was estab-

lished in 2004 by the South Chicago Arts Center as part of its mission to provide safe places for children after school. In a community that has seen sharp racial divides and conflicts, the garden lies directly between a Section 8 housing facility inhabited mainly by African Americans and a block housing mostly first-generation Mexican immigrants. Evidence of the garden's weekly summertime art classes is everywhere. Colorful mosaic benches line the wide mulch path that leads towards a small, organic structure hung with sculptures swaying in the breeze. Around this hut, the garden spreads out in all directions with large, irregularly shaped beds defined by wooden planks.

The garden's harvest follows a few different paths. Some is donated to the nearby Ada McKinley food pantry to provide fresh produce to those who otherwise would not

have access to it or be able to afford it; this neighborhood is considered a food desert. Much of the harvest finds its way home with the youth volunteers, as the art center holds weekly cooking demonstrations and then sends students home with fresh ingredients and recipes. Helping teenagers develop a taste for healthy dishes and some skill in preparing them is one way to combat the obesity epidemic. Lastly, the garden does have some individual allotment spaces. One gardener, who also raises chickens at his home, showed off the rows of tiny peach trees he was growing to sell.

In a neighborhood with high numbers of families living below national poverty levels, the garden provides the community with some organic produce, encourages residents to grow their own crops, and educates youths on the importance of healthy eating. However, "more important than the produce itself are the interactions and relationships forged between neighbors," writes the art center's founder. "The garden is proving to be a place where neighbors can meet and work together on a common goal." Growing food is that common goal, but in building a garden these neighbors are also building a community.

On their own, community gardens can't solve the food crisis. They cannot single-handedly be expected to solve the obesity epidemic or eliminate food deserts. These crises are complex problems with tangled roots. The obesity epidemic, for example, has multiple causes: larger portions, fast food, the

lure of the computer, the simple fact that many children no longer walk to school. Food deserts have more to do with a lack of grocery stores and prohibitive school vendor contracts than with the availability of locally grown produce.

At the same time, a community garden's inadequacy as a comprehensive solution to an array of food-related societal problems doesn't mean that it can't be an important partner in a broad effort to solve those problems. It can, for example, connect hundreds of volunteers and children to the process of growing food, which research shows leads directly to choosing healthier eating options.

A community garden can also model an ideal food environment, often in stark contrast to the world around it. The family dinner has been on the decline for decades. More and more, we eat on the go or in front of a screen. But in community gardens, people reclaim the social life surrounding their food with communal meals. In one survey done in New York City, more than 60 percent of the gardeners who responded said that they host barbecues and picnics in their gardens. All

around the country, community gardens are providing a place where people can eat together, and they are often serving carrots that didn't travel fifteen hundred miles to

View of a decorative arbor and a cement dog sculpture created by local artist Roman Villarreal and teenager interns from the South Chicago Art Center.



reach the picnic table alongside the store-bought chips.

When the recession passes and unemployment goes down, what will become of the thousands of community gardens that have sprouted up in the last few years? Will they survive, or will they go the way of vacant-lot gardens, war gardens, victory gardens, and many of the 1970s community gardens? If we view these gardens not as quick fixes to the present crises but instead as part of larger efforts to make neighborhoods and communities more livable, their chances of survival will be far greater. Thankfully, more and more municipalities are beginning to recognize and support community gardens for what they are: places of resiliency that allow for permanent change.

"By providing multiple social, economic, and health benefits," argues Peter Harnik, director of the Center for City Park Excellence, in his recent book, *Urban Green: Innovative Parks for Resurgent Cities*, "community gardens present a new model of the 'neighborhood common' that should be considered a part of the neighborhood infrastructure, similar to the basic necessity of neighborhood parks, playgrounds, community centers, schools, and libraries."

In cities like Chicago and San Francisco, structures are being put in place to enable community gardens to persist in perpetuity. Many cities are formally recognizing community gardens and urban agriculture in zoning codes. This official recognition represents a new watermark in the history of urban gardening. Historically, lack of land security has been the fundamental problem of community gardens; they were considered temporary. Now, in major cities, land trusts are stepping up to permanently secure land for gardens.

And yet a plot of land or a persuasively argued grant proposal is not all that's needed to create a successful garden; a community garden needs to speak to the varied and ever-changing needs of its community to survive and thrive. The gardeners will be

the ones not only to determine its capacity but also its direction, for if their needs are not being met, they will drift away and the garden will be reclaimed by nature and the city. Indeed, surveys show a lack of interest is the main reason gardens fail. In other words, it is the process by which people continually create and *re-create* community gardens that gives them their strength. Ideally, city dwellers will continue to be drawn to these unique urban landscapes – even if they are nourished by them in different ways and see in them different possibilities. As a recent study in *Landscape Journal* concluded, "The successful community garden is less about a grand design than about facilitating a dialogue whereby the community identifies, priorities, and visualizes its garden."

Youth gardener Deja clears debris during a spring work day in the Artists' Garden.

The fact that gardens spring up in the city again and again



suggests that there will always be a need for them. They are a repository of our urban ideals, hopes, dreams, and possibilities. They offer responses to seemingly intractable problems, but on a scale that appeals to American traditions of self-sufficiency; the core belief that individuals and communities can take control of and improve their own lives. It is therefore important to be accurate about what they can and cannot accomplish in moments of crisis. At the same time, we must remember that the larger cultural concerns they address – from obesity to global warming – are ongoing, and that community gardens will continue to influence our approaches to these challenges in both profound and nuanced ways.

– Ben Helphand and Laura Lawson

Rooftop Revolution: Culinary Gardening Aloft in New York City

High above New York, a quiet revolution is taking place on urban rooftops. Time was that most roof gardens were purely decorative, the privileged enclaves of a few well-heeled city dwellers. Such gardens still flourish but today the roof has become the frontier for large-scale edible gardening. There will always be New Yorkers who lovingly tend small pots of herbs on their window sills and take pride in cultivating a single tomato vine perched on the rung of a fire escape, but now there is also a new generation of imaginative, ambitious gardeners using roofs – usually on top of large commercial buildings – to grow vegetables and fruit, make compost, breed chickens, and even keep bees. Most of the food produced in these ventures ends up for sale somewhere – on the plate at a high-end restaurant, say, or in the display case of a gourmet food store. But that does not mean that these burgeoning rooftop enterprises are necessarily cost-effective. Designing and maintaining a sophisticated vegetable garden is not so very different from designing and maintaining a perennial garden – to do so requires passion, time, and a serious outlay of cash.

Annie Novak, the co-founder and head farmer of Eagle Street Rooftop Farm, is one such urban garden pioneer, and her six-thousand-foot, organic vegetable farm – perched on top of a soundstage warehouse in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, with glorious views in every direction – is stunning. The farm, which required sophisticated engineering, was designed by Goode Greene in 2008 for Gina Argentino, the owner of the building; she in turn allows Novak to run it. Some two hundred thousand pounds of growing soil (a combination of compost, rock particulates, and shale) was lifted by crane onto a two-inch layer of polyethylene drainage matting tough enough to support one and one-half inches of rainwater. Irrigation is provided by plastic drip lines. (Novak is not a fan of conventional watering, believing that it can be harmful to plants exposed to intense sun.) During the summer months, Novak and a team of between six to twelve regular apprentices and volunteers tend to more than thirty kinds of vegetables and fruits and do all their own composting. She both supplies local restaurants and sells her produce at a weekly market, held on-site.

In addition to her commercial growing venture – which is self-supporting, although her landlord does not charge her any rent and many of her helpers are volunteers – Novak is the part-time coordinator of the New York Botanical Garden's

Children's Gardening Program and also manages to fit in taking care of a large, private, edible rooftop garden in Battery Park. She travels among her various jobs by bicycle, thinks nothing of covering more than eighteen miles between boroughs in a day, and yet she still finds the time and energy to pore over seed catalogues and worry about whether a salad green such as mizuna or mâche will fare better in her garden than Tokyo Bekana.

Novak, who sees herself not as an entrepreneur but as an “urban agriculturist,” is the founder and director of a non-profit enterprise, Growing Chefs, which organizes classes and workshops on such topics as composting, beekeeping, seeds, and soil. Funds are raised through local events at the rooftop farm. There is no “donate here” button on her website, she pointed out, but she is delighted to have received her first foundation grant recently. At the same time, Novak is adamant that even if her rooftop farm could entirely support her, she would never give up her other gardening ventures: she thrives on the variety.

Ben Flanner, an engineer who formerly worked on Wall Street, was the co-founder of Eagle Street. He has gone on to run an even larger and more ambitious farm in Long Island City, Queens, which is somewhat confusingly called Brooklyn Grange. (Flanner had originally planned to open a farm in Brooklyn and kept the name when the plans fell through.) Brooklyn Grange is forty thousand square feet (that's almost an acre), and after some problems with the Department of Buildings over plans and permits, it opened in June of last year, becoming the first CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) farm in Queens; other CSA farm produce is available in the borough, but it is trucked in. Flanner wants to demonstrate that urban farming can be a viable enterprise, and Brooklyn Grange sells its produce to restaurants, busi-

nesses, and individuals. Certainly the size is impressive but, as Novak points out, bigger is not always better: “larger farms may not be the answer since they require more labor, and that's the most expensive cost factor in gardening.”

Restaurateurs are beginning to understand what good sense it makes to grow fresh vegetables and herbs on top of their kitchens and, in increasing numbers, they are getting onto the roof. Last April, the chef, sous chef, and manager of Maialino, Danny Meyer's restaurant in the Gramercy Park Hotel, set up a garden on the roof of the hotel, using old wine buckets and sauce bowls as planters for their seedlings and constructing raised beds out of old floorboards, which they lined with old tablecloths from the restaurant. They also devised an irrigation system that channels water from the building's downspout into a fifty-five-gallon drum. By the end of the summer, rhubarb was growing in a former duck roasting pan, tomato plants were sprouting out of reused paint buckets, and cucamelon (Mexican sour cucumber) vines were climbing up scrap metal from an old file cabinet. There is now a rooftop restaurant opening onto the garden.

John Mooney is a restaurateur who planned and got his own rooftop garden up and running in advance of opening his restaurant, Bell Book & Candle, in Greenwich Village at the end of last year. He sees it as an integral part of his kitchen and is growing over seventy kinds of fruits, vegetables, and

Vegetables and herbs growing in the rainwater-irrigated garden atop Gramercy Park Hotel all find their way onto the menu of Maialino.



herbs six floors above his diners. Since the building is a walk-up, he uses a pulley system to lower the produce

down to street level. This farm is hydroponic and plants are grown on cylindrical towers, five to seven feet high, which support plastic trellises. Mooney has sixty of these towers, and they are heated with recycled water that is pumped through a system of reservoir bases. This allows planting to begin as early as March. "Absolutely, my garden saves me money," Mooney maintains. "I have no transportation costs because I am not moving my crops or storing my produce. I'm serving it right away, and what I have is not only fresher and better than what I could buy, it is also far more cost-effective."

Brewers and bakers are also taking to their roofs. At Six Point Brewery in Red Hook, Brooklyn, chickens cluck and peck in an outdoor pen set in a rooftop garden that is the preferred summer lunchtime spot for the brewery staff. This garden is the brainchild of Shane Welch, who founded the brewery in 2004 and wanted to find a use for his old, broken kegs. (Six Points doesn't use bottles but distributes its beer in kegs to bars and restaurants in and around New York City.) "The roof was a graveyard for broken kegs, but cut off their tops and they make great planters," says Cathy Erway, director of communications for the brewery, who works with Welch on the garden. "Now we grow peas, beans, cauliflowers and leafy greens, and use the produce to make lunch for the staff, who are also invited to pick and take food home." Corn didn't grow well and has been discontinued but Welch is now growing four different varieties of hops, which he hopes to use for experimental brews and maybe even one day develop into "a botanical beer."

Eli Zabar owns and farms two rooftops in Manhattan. One is on top of the Vinegar Factory, his food market at York Avenue and Ninetieth Street; the other is on top of a bakery he operates in a commercial building immediately opposite. Together they occupy eleven thousand square feet and include four greenhouses. The heat from the bread ovens provides most of the heat for the greenhouses. Zabar's bookkeeper, Monica Dandridge, has become his gardener-in-chief. "It all began with Eli wanting to get good tomatoes for the store ten years ago," she says. "I'm not a gardener by trade but Eli has made me one." Today, the garden produces sixteen different heirloom varieties of tomatoes, all of them sold in the store. "Yes, it's cost-effective," she says, "we sell everything we grow in

Eli Zabar in one of his rooftop greenhouses above the Vinegar Factory on 91st Street and York.



our stores and three restaurants." Of course, the fact that the space is free and the heating costs relatively low should be considered as part of the equation.

Beekeeping is another rooftop pursuit now in vogue. Several years ago, the idea of keeping bees on a city rooftop came to David Graves, a farmer who lives in Becket, Massachusetts, and sells his produce at the Union Square Greenmarket. At the time, he was having trouble with bears on his farm, and he realized he would not have this problem were his hives in the city. First, he got permission to keep a hive on the roof of the Greenmarket office building on East Sixteenth Street, and now he has hives on top of several houses in Greenwich Village and on a hotel, whose name he will not divulge. Graves is not entirely happy that beekeeping in the city was legalized in 1996. "Too many people are now doing it and there's not enough nectar to go round," he says. His biggest problems, however, are the recent proliferation of cell towers (they emit electromagnetic waves that cause bees to lose their way back to their hives) and a Parks Department that is trying to stamp out Japanese knotweed. A cause of celebration for those who detest this invasive plant but not for Graves: "They're a favorite source of nectar for my bees."

Edible rooftop projects are gaining a lot of attention and there is even a website (www.seglet.com) intended to connect owners wishing to rent out rooftops and urban gardeners looking to farm them. In *Green Metropolis: Why Living Smaller, Living Closer, and Driving Less are the Keys to Sustainability* (2009) David Owen argues that despite the lack of good soil and the pollution caused by trucks and traffic, New York is far greener than its surrounding suburbs and is getting greener every day. He sees Manhattanites, in particular, as models of environmental responsibility. Eighty-two percent of them

travel to their place of work by foot, bicycle, or public transportation, and many do not own cars or consume gasoline. Lack of open space has always made it difficult for New Yorkers to grow their own food, but this drawback has become the impetus for a range of wonderfully inventive developments in the art of skyline gardening.

While offering many advantages such as reducing building heat and lowering water run-off, the challenges of rooftop farming should not be underestimated. First, a structural engineer must confirm the roof's ability to bear the weight, and then there is the challenge of hauling the soil up to the roof (with or without a crane), working out suitable drainage, and successfully managing plants subject to direct sunlight and high-wind conditions. Hydroponic farming, which John Mooney strongly advocates, is another exciting possibility for the future. But, like all small-farming ventures, rooftop farms are not a quick way to get rich, and profit margins depend on such variables as availability and cost of labor, access to consumers, and even good weather. At the same time, these new projects in New York City point the way to the future and are vital stepping stones if we want to get serious about exploring the possibilities of large-scale, urban roof agriculture. — Jane Garmey

They Built a Fahm in Hahvud Yahd: A Tiny Garden Strives for Global Impact

In April 2010 a crew of students and workers from Harvard University's landscape services built a vegetable garden on the lawn in front of Lowell House, an undergraduate dorm notable for its elaborate, blue-domed cupola. It has housed, at various times, Robert Lowell, Harry Blackmun, John Updike, David Souter, Nicholas Kristof, and Matt Damon. Fronting Mt. Auburn Street, one of the main thoroughfares of Harvard Square, the garden plot is flanked by two final clubs (exclusive private social clubs for Harvard undergraduates), the Phoenix and the Fly. A more prestigious patch of ground — and a more public place to plant food crops — would be hard to find in Massachusetts and, arguably, the world.

The size of the Harvard Community Garden (HCG) is modest: 560 square feet of growing surface, roughly one-third of an acre. Twenty-four raised beds of different sizes and heights cluster together on a flat, stone-dust surface; roughly a third of them are wheelchair-accessible. The non-linear arrangement of these tablelike platforms creates

intriguing volumes of space, making it hard to assess the precise size of the whole. On a brilliant day in early October, about six weeks before the end of the garden's first growing season, the last crops added a sensory dimension to the spatial geometry: ruffle-edged lettuces, dark-veined beet greens, pale onion shoots, candy-colored stalks of rainbow chard. Bees worked the spires of basil flowers. Squashes ripened under leaves the size of dinner plates, and near the split-rail fence that separates the garden from the sidewalk, the vines of a "Sungold" cherry tomato drooped under the weight of ripe fruit.

Like many community gardens, this one is staffed largely by volunteers (here, mostly students), and the food it produces is consumed locally (primarily in the Faculty Club, about a quarter mile away). And yet its ambitions far exceed its acreage and its yield.

The HCG is a project of Harvard Medical School's Center for Health and the Global Environment (CHGE), which is directed by Eric Chivian, M.D. An assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the medical school, Chivian founded CHGE in 1996. He was convinced that "at the heart of the present environmental crisis is a fundamental disconnect between human beings and the environment," he said in a recent telephone interview. "If people don't see themselves as part of the natural world, it becomes OK to degrade soils and alter the atmosphere and overfish the oceans, because there's a sense that it won't affect us. Teaching students to recognize environmental threats to their physical well-being is a good way to correct that misapprehension."

Chivian and others – notably Alice Waters, who helped Yale University establish a one-acre campus farm almost a decade ago – recognize that food is, for many of us, our most tangible and intimate connection to that threatened world. CHGE operates a Healthy and Sustainable Food program focused on the fact that food production is touched by every environmental scourge, from climate change to ozone depletion, and contributes to several others, such as loss of habitat and water scarcity. On an individual level, the challenges and rewards of growing things bring these problems into sharp relief. In addition, as Chivian points out, many other disciplines converge in the garden: "Whether students are studying insect zoology, biology, landscape design, or the economics of food security around the world, they can find no more direct way to understand these issues than by growing food."

CHGE's stated vision for the garden is to "bring together members of the community to raise awareness about the critical role that food plays in our environment and our health."



Harvard students and community members plant the first seeds in the Harvard Community Garden.

Given the potentially unlimited size of the community, that goal is ambitious. Penetrating even the Harvard community will require breaching the myriad "silos" or domains within a large, compartmentalized institution. And influencing the neighborhoods surrounding the university will require bridging a moat of longstanding distrust based on vast differences of class, wealth, and power. Should the garden and its programs accomplish this, as Yale's farm administrators claim to have done to a remarkable extent over the past several years, a more permeable environment and a fluid exchange of knowledge might be the most meaningful outcome of HCG and of the broader campus farm movement – an outcome that might, in turn, affect meaningful change.

Inspired by the experience of running a small fruit orchard at his home in central Massachusetts, Chivian has dreamed of starting a farm at Harvard since at least April 2006, when he presented the idea at a Harvard symposium. Independently and as yet unaware of Chivian's discussions, the student-led

Environmental Action Committee (EAC) polled undergraduates and found that 60 percent of them were in favor of starting a garden or a farm.

In early 2007 the university unveiled a plan to expand into Allston, an ethnically diverse, largely blue-collar Boston neighborhood across the Charles River, where Harvard owns 359 acres (149 acres more than in Cambridge) and is widely viewed with suspicion and dislike. Again independently of one another, both EAC and the parties discussing a farm with Chivian supported locating it in Allston to benefit and positively engage

residents. The farm concept also dovetailed with the budding sustainability movement on campus. In 2008 the university announced the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions 30 percent below 2006 levels by 2016 and established the Office for Sustainability to make it happen.

These various interests and advocacy groups converged in 2009. In the spring EAC circulated a position paper advocating for a "multipurpose, multidisciplinary" garden in front of Lowell House, which could also provide space to demonstrate renewable-energy technology, display public art, host performances, and serve as an outdoor classroom and research station. In July, Chivian wrote to President Drew Gilpin Faust proposing to include a farm in the Allston expansion plan, arguing that a farm would promote "passionate student involvement," interdisciplinary educational opportunities, and a site for student and faculty research. A university farm would also offer Allston "a resource for community engagement at Harvard." (Unlike the EAC proposal, Chivian's did not encompass the arts.) He also mentioned that he had already recruited Prince Charles, an organic farmer with whom Chivian was collaborating on several environmental and human-health projects, to the project's advisory board.

Chivian's proposal invoked "Harvard's rich history in the agricultural sciences," which began with the establishment of the Bussey Institution, an undergraduate school of agriculture and horticulture, in Jamaica Plain in 1870. The institute, part of which later became the Arnold Arboretum, offered a multidisciplinary program until 1908. At different times, its faculty included Charles Sprague Sargent and Charles Eliot. The school raised vegetables for the Harvard College food services.

Faust signed off on the project. A few months later, however, the economy spiraled out of control and the university postponed the expansion. With Chivian's blessing, Kathleen Frith, assistant director of CHGE, kept the momentum going by downsizing the farm concept to a garden plot in Cambridge, as EAC had proposed. The garden's objectives, aside from engaging Allston residents, remained much the same as those for the farm. By now EAC and the CHGE group had become aware of their parallel efforts and started working toward their common goal with the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the Office for Sustainability, and Dining Services, as well as the president's office.

Frith said that her team had considered other locations before settling on Lowell House, factoring in not only public visibility but also the availability of water, sun, and other practical needs. As it turned out, the sunny spot near the sidewalk in front of Lowell House was just close enough to an outdoor spigot in the dorm that gardeners could run a hose between them.

Like many urban landscape projects, this one posed challenges of overlapping jurisdictions, underground utility lines, historical commission review, and proximity to an electric-power substation. Resolving these issues brought multiple parties together from the start, which is common in landscape architecture. For most of those involved in developing this garden, however, it was a new experience. "We kept hearing about how crazy it was that all these different departments and agencies were involved," said Zachary C. M. Arnold, Harvard 2010, who was an active member of EAC and a

garden volunteer. "Electrical workers were learning about the goals of the food project and administrators and staff who generally don't work with students were working with students. The grounds crew guys worked alongside students to install the beds."

Frith continues to provide administrative oversight. "Everyone loves this project," she told me during my tour of the garden in October. "There has been such generous giving of resources and time. It's not just that faculty are coming together in the garden that's exciting – it's that faculty and staff and students and community members are coming together." The enthusiasm that the garden's proponents have repeatedly voiced about its power to unite such a wide spectrum of people illuminates how sparse such connections generally are in university life. "As with lots of large institutions with many different disciplines and functions and departments, it's easy for folks to stay within their close community," Frith admits. "Chances for multidisciplinary collaboration – which is one of President Faust's big goals – are rare."

Chivian believes that the human tendency to separate and contain specialized knowledge is a huge obstacle to addressing world problems. The garden's potential to topple the silos therefore has exciting ramifications – both at Harvard and beyond. "To really solve global environmental issues, you have to bring together many people with different expertise and experience," he pointed out. "You can't talk about biodiversity unless you talk about oceans, or climate change without atmospheric chemistry, so the more interfaculty, interschool, interdisciplinary efforts you have at a university, the better the chances are of bringing that cooperation to a larger arena."

There is also something to be said for rendering the

abstract tangible. Donald Pfister, Asa Gray Professor of Systematic Botany, leads his undergraduates through the raised beds for his course Plants and Human Affairs. "I do a tour in the garden and introduce plant structure," he says. "We might stop and look at broccoli and cabbage, and I ask students why these might be classified together. They smell and taste the plants, look at the flowers, and start seeing similarities. It brings an immediacy that taking the same plants into

the lab doesn't do as well." A mycologist, Anne Pringle, studies fungal relationships in the garden.

Ideally, the garden will soon be as integrated into the academic curriculum as its larger counterpart is at Yale, where professors teaching several dozen courses across disciplines – including African studies, psychology, gender studies, environmental biology, geology, and economics – have incorporated the garden into the curriculum. "It's fine to have this cute little thing that newspapers cover," Chivian said, "but most important is that it serves as hands-on educational experience for students and faculty, so that they can learn that fundamental fact: that we're connected to the natural world." Although the present garden is too small to support many research projects, he still hopes to build a larger one when Harvard expands into Allston.

Were Harvard's novice gardeners disappointed by the size of their plot? On the contrary, although the founding year's yield was unrecorded, many students expressed amazement at their garden's abundance. Throughout the growing season, they sold about 90 percent of the garden's produce to their dining services partner, the Harvard Faculty Club, where its vegetables were spotlighted on the menus. The rest were consumed in community events at the garden and donated to local food banks. "This is only our first year, but we produced a ton," said Louisa Denison, one of the garden's student co-managers, who had spent a previous summer working on a farm. Rebecca Cohen, the other co-manager, who confessed in an e-mail that she had come to the project with "zero experience," also expressed delight at the unanticipated bounty from such a small space.

However fresh they are to growing food, the co-managers have no illusions about feeding the entire campus, even on a much larger plot. Like the faculty and administrators I spoke with, they frame the garden's success in terms of what they are learning and the responses it has sparked in others. "In our first season we mostly had undergraduates working in the garden, but from the management/administrative standpoint we have had an amazing amount of collaboration," Cohen said, listing not only volunteers from the Graduate School of Design but also undergraduates and faculty from the School of Public Health, the Medical School, and the Law School. "Knowing how isolated the schools can be from one another, it has been a great experience to work with faculty and students from across all the schools." Meanwhile, in January, Frith and the students were making plans to double the size of the



The Garden is maintained over the summer by community volunteers and two student interns.



Harvard undergrad Zoe Tucker shows off a salad harvested from the garden.

garden in spring 2011. “We’re also working with design students again to add seating and some kind of a vertical

growing space on the wall of the Phoenix,” she said. Devising a water catchment system is also high on the list, and she is reaching out to engineering students for help with that.

In addition, the garden’s organizers are planning activities to extend their influence beyond Harvard Yard. In October, their Harvest Festival drew hundreds of Cambridge residents to the garden for live music, cider pressing, food demonstrations, and informational tours. “We were able to get people into the garden, have them enjoy themselves, and get them thinking about the garden’s function and importance all at the same time,” Denison said. She also stressed the success of the regular events hosted in the garden: cooking demonstrations, work days, compost discussions. As anticipated, the garden’s intentionally visible location hasn’t hurt. “People walk by and they comment on the size of the kale or the height of the peas,” she added. Maybe they will start thinking about where their own produce is coming from, whether it is available locally, and how far it has had to travel to reach their table.

The 2011 growing season, which begins in April, will bring new challenges for the student gardeners. They will need to meet the modest goal of balancing the cost of seeds and soil with income from the sale of produce. They will also need to meet the demands of the marketplace: at the end of the 2010 season, chefs from the Faculty Club met with gardeners to request more unusual crops to feature on their menus. But the

marketplace will remain deliberately constrained; Frith stresses that however much food the garden – or an eventual farm in Allston – yields, CHGE’s goal is not to compete with local farmers. “Just the opposite,” she said. “We want to raise awareness of fresh, local food sources.”

Chivian chafes at any suggestion that the garden’s size reduces it to a token gesture. “It’s very significant that this garden produces real food,” he said, emphasizing that it is the actual experience of *growing something* that engages people – whether they approach it as an engineer challenged to design a hoop house for growing vegetables in winter or as a foodie thrilled to be able to produce six kinds of basil. “It’s not fair to say it’s just a symbol, because what it has done is energize an entire student movement,” he said. “It allows us, as the center that’s running it, to host various conferences about growing sustainable food at a university and to bring in people from other universities to talk about everything from food pantries to composting.”

Since 2003, when Yale broke ground for its farm, several other Ivies – Brown, Harvard, Columbia, Princeton – plus Duke, Stanford, Wesleyan, and several state universities – have either started college gardens or farms or set aside funds for them. Chivian and Frith have turned mainly to Yale for advice on matters both practical and philosophical. Yet, in spite of the Yale farm’s long head start, direct involvement with Alice Waters, and acclaimed success, in terms of potential influence Harvard’s garden has the advantage of being at Harvard.

As Arnold put it, “The elephant in the room in any educative enterprise at Harvard is, ‘It’s Harvard.’ We are always aware that what we do has more of a chance of being covered in the *New York Times* or otherwise carried out into the world. The sense of Harvard exceptionalism touches everything here. That includes what we do internally to influence the student body; there is an understanding that these students will go off and become captains of industry and finance and politics, so we want to capture them and inform their values.” Perhaps even as they stroll past the garden to grab dinner at Lowell House, or to party at the Fly.

Although the garden has been around for less than a year, Frith gave me some examples of changes that have already taken place. In an accidental object lesson, she discovered this fall that students, staff, and faculty at Harvard Divinity School, about a mile from the undergraduate campus, had been cultivating a small vegetable plot for two years. Neither group was aware of the other. Excited by their discovery, the gardeners made plans to share event schedules and other information. She has also worked with the Office for Sustainability to spread the garden idea to other Harvard schools, and recently

learned that staff and faculty and students at the Harvard Law School, about a mile away in Cambridge, and the Medical School, in Boston, have been inspired to start their own gardens.

And how about the students leaving Harvard for the wider world? Arnold, who now works developing green-technology jobs in a low-income Boston neighborhood, was an environmentalist long before the raised beds arrived in the Yard last spring – in fact, long before he himself arrived at Harvard. But he, too, learned an important lesson from HCG – about community organizing. The garden attracted a new constituency of students he’d never identified before – people who shared an environmental mindset but who hadn’t been involved in traditional environmental activities on campus. “Maybe they aren’t comfortable with activism or policy,” he mused. “But they felt it was meaningful to contribute through a garden.”

– Jane Roy Brown

Lessons in the Dirt: School Gardens Grow in Brooklyn

Growing up in Oklahoma, I spent hours of my early childhood helping my mother in our backyard garden, where only a few strands of slack barbed wire separated our little plot from the adjoining wheat fields. The tangy-sweet smell of an onion flower, the slimy caress of an earthworm wriggling across my palm, the juicy gems of button-sized strawberries half-hidden in the leafy ground cover – these now-indelible recollections were part and parcel of life growing up as a semirural youngster. At the time I was simply picking snap peas and pulling weeds; only later did I recognize the simple lessons reaped along those rows. Plan well. Know your soil. Work hard. Learn from your failures. Remember that, with patience, bounty can spring forth from humble seeds.

Traditionally these lessons have been hard to come by for children reared in big cities, but that is beginning to change. Backyard gardens might often be beyond the space and time constraints of many urban families, but new opportunities are cropping up for children to discover some of these precepts in the soil. Even in Brooklyn, New York City’s most populous borough, gardens are sprouting in public schools from Bay Ridge to Crown Heights.

Some gardens are not much more than a few containers clustered in a rare, sunny corner. Others are cultivated lots, complete with paths and ornamental plantings. Some have been conceived and supported by larger organizations, such as

Alice Waters's Chez Panisse Foundation, but most are home-grown efforts that are scraping by on piecemeal grants, administrative goodwill, and the hard work of a few dedicated parents.

On a bright, cold Friday morning in November, half-a-dozen parents are gathered in the lot-sized yard next to P.S. 102 The Bayview, in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn. Far down the R subway line, this historically Italian and Norwegian neighborhood is now home to a broader mix of families, including those of Asian and Middle Eastern descent.

The fenced-in space spent decades as a blighted and semia-bandoned lot, collecting trash and beer bottles from the bar traffic on the busy avenue nearby. More recently it has been used to grow pumpkins for P.S. 102 students each fall. Now every Friday parents arrive at the garden to work on the space and help teachers with the classes cycling through. On the Friday I visited, some parents were mixing concrete in wood frames for tiles that the students would later decorate for the garden; others were constructing a table out of reclaimed wood. The chain-link fence was adorned with bright paintings on wood panels.

Now in its second school year, the garden space looks well cared for. A path skirts the perimeter of the lot; a composting barrel stands tucked away in a corner; and a small tree is surrounded by a modest, year-round cactus garden.

Fourth graders at P.S. 102 in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, plant an azalea in the school's garden as part of a school-wide celebration of Arbor Day. Photograph by Rana Abu-Sbaih.



More than half of the school's fifty-five classes spent some time in the garden last year, said Margaret Sheri, the school's parent coordinator. And even though these five-to-ten-year-olds can be pretty rowdy on the playground (which sits on blacktop just behind the garden), when they're in the garden space, Sheri said, "they're really respectful." Parent volunteers spend hours in the garden most weeks, taking care of the big projects: building tables, mixing cement, turning compost. The gardening is mostly left to the students. "The point is for the kids to do it," Sheri said. "They're definitely taking a sense of ownership." She also observed that integrating the garden into the curricula can help children retain lessons associated with their experiences: "Anything like that really sticks in your head because it's different."

P.S. 102 is unusual in that it has three classes of visually impaired students. This gave parent volunteer Tom Mazzone the idea of planting a fragrant, edible herb garden – what he called the "scratch-and-sniff garden." Students, regardless of their visual acuity, can walk around the large square plucking leaves of lemon balm, yarrow, and fennel, crushing them between their fingers and getting to know their names, textures, and smells.

Sheri noted that the garden's herbs have also connected many of the students to their cultural backgrounds by smell alone. Children from Italian families recognized the oregano as the smell of their grandmother's pasta sauce, and those from some of the Middle Eastern families got excited because the sage reminded them of their parents' aromatic tea. In addition to the fragrant plants, Mazzone said, "the smell of soil calms your whole spirit." It has already provided some young students with a reflective attitude. Working with a second grade class, Mazzone asked them, "What does gardening mean to you?" One girl responded, "It means patience."

P.S. 102's side lot was not always a neglected space. During World War II, it was used for victory gardens, which were tended by the students. Some of those mid-twentieth-century gardeners still live close by – one woman right next door to the garden lot. She told Mazzone that her plot of beans at the school's victory garden was one of the things that has kept her gardening in the neighborhood ever since. "There's definitely an effect that's lifelong," Mazzone said.

For young children, the draw of dirt does not appear to recognize any urban-rural

divide. "All the kids love the soil," said Michele Israel, a parent at P.S. 107 John W. Kimball in Park Slope and a co-founder of the school garden there. Jonathan Blumberg, another parent and co-founder who grew up with a backyard garden in the Midwest, liked the idea of "giving every kid a chance to see where things come from." Israel and Blumberg began planning the garden in the spring of 2008, when they both had students in the first grade.

P.S. 107 did not have an ideal place for a garden, or even any soil to work with. What it did have was a north-facing, concrete side yard, bordered on three sides by the school building. "You have to be creative," Bloomberg said. The parents discovered that lack of arable land was not an insurmountable setback. In fact, even schools in the borough with tillable spaces often find that they cannot plant crops in them because of high levels of lead and other contaminants; instead, clean dirt has to be imported and placed in raised beds or containers.

Fortunately a planter box is all you need to convince kids to get their hands dirty. Using container planters that get only partial sunlight, the gardeners at P.S. 107 have still produced plenty of harvestable crops – as well as the accompanying worms, slugs, and bugs that so fascinate most children. Not all of the plants have made it, of course, and when maintenance had to be done on the school's exterior, the necessary scaffolding ate up even more of the limited space and sunlight. But the heartier plants' persistence was in itself a lesson. "You can grow things with a short growing season," Israel pointed out. "You can grow things in the shade. You can have a garden where there's no green space."

Much of the recent momentum behind school gardens comes from the burgeoning movement to improve children's eating habits – and thereby combat the rise of childhood obesity and related health problems – by acquainting kids with their fruits and veggies. Michelle Obama's large vegetable garden at the White House, which produced more than a thousand pounds of produce its first year, is planted and harvested with the help of local schoolchildren.

The trend has also been fed by the expansion of farmers' markets and community gardens, and a growing interest in, and support for, local food. New York City's urban gardening program, GreenThumb, which is run through the Department of Parks & Recreation, has donated clean soil to school gardens throughout the city. And in Gravesend, Brooklyn, Alice Waters's Chez Panisse Foundation is supporting a version of its California-based Edible Schoolyard project, a children's gardening program whose mission is to "encourage awareness

and appreciation of the transformative values of nourishment, community, and stewardship of the land.”

Despite not having enough space to grow crops to contribute to the school’s cafeteria, those behind the garden at P.S. 107 were determined to forge a connection between their gleanings and the students’ diet. So organizers held a taste test of various dishes made from the same herbs and vegetables the kids had been growing and let them vote on their favorite; the winner’s ingredients were then sourced from local growers and incorporated into the school’s rotating menu.

For some students, even a modest school garden is a rare place of bounty. At P.S. 12 in Crown Heights, where 83 percent of the students qualify for free lunches, local parent Karen Bucknor has been showing the school’s 340-plus students the gardening techniques she learned as a child from her grandmother.

Bucknor told me with a laugh that she has been gardening “basically since I was born.” She had been working at a nearby community garden when the principal at her children’s school suggested she start a garden on the school’s grounds. Although the principal had envisioned a flower garden, Bucknor thought a food garden would be even better for the students. “I asked them where the food comes from, and they said ‘the supermarket,’” she recalled. So she got to work, putting in a raised-bed vegetable garden behind the school, which sits on a residential block in a neighborhood dotted with public housing developments and storefront Baptist churches.

Bucknor planned the crops, which included, among other offerings, eggplant, okra, onions, beans, basil, cabbage, and collard greens. But then she put the students to work. “I demonstrate first,” she explained, but then the kids “do everything”: dig, plant, water, and harvest.

Some argue that sending students out to tend tomatoes is a waste of valuable school time, especially for inner-city children who may already face educational disadvantages. Writing in early 2010 in *The Atlantic*, author Caitlin Flanagan critiqued the “vacuous if well-meaning ideology that is responsible for robbing an increasing number of American schoolchildren of hours they might otherwise [sic] have spent reading important books or learning higher math.” Indeed, reformers spent decades in the nineteenth century lobbying to get kids out of fields and factories and into the classroom. But even well-appointed classrooms lack some of the educational opportunities that are native to a garden, proponents argue. Aside from lessons about food, nutrition, and ecology, students in a garden can start “getting a sense of what the environment is like around them,” said Katy Botta, a Connecticut-based educator

who uses a garden-centered curriculum. By providing an opening for curiosity as well as a palette for experimentation, Botta continued, gardens “help kids develop ownership of their environment.” And that sense of ownership can be especially valuable for children growing up with little freedom of movement or control over their surroundings.

On a practical level, in public schools across Brooklyn and the U.S., many gardens get used as do most school resources these days: in as many ways as possible. Aside from valuing the hands-in-the-dirt and food- and environmental-awareness aspects of the gardens, teachers are using them to engage students in writing, math, science, and art. While at the garden, “they do math, they write,” Bucknor said of students she works with. “We collect seeds, then they count the seeds before they plant.”

Tara Troxler, a first-grade teacher at P.S. 107, has been using the garden and indoor planters as a way to integrate scientific thinking into her curriculum. The students keep journals and figure out what questions they want to answer. “They’re like little scientists,” she said. The hands-on aspect of the garden helped engage the kids and inspired diligence as they tended to their individual tasks, she noted.

The garden learning has extended beyond the school day. Participants in after-school and summer-school programs have been working in many of the gardens. And some children come back – often bringing parents and other family members – even when programs are not in session, to water, weed or just wonder at the plants’ progress.

Community members who don’t have children at these schools have been drawn in by the garden projects as well. In Bay Ridge, neighbors have offered tomatoes, flowers, and moral support to the school gardeners. And Bucknor reported that once her school garden in Crown Heights was up and running, “people from the neighborhood, they came by to help out.”

Given the undeniable popularity of school gardens throughout the borough, Bucknor is frustrated that there is still an unmet need. “Every school needs to have a school garden,” she declared. Far from constituting a burden, working in the garden seems to be a joy for most children. In fact, making enough time in the garden available to all those who want to visit is much more of a problem than finding willing hands. “When I’m out there,” she said, “everybody wants to come at the same time.” – Katherine Harmon

Place Keeper

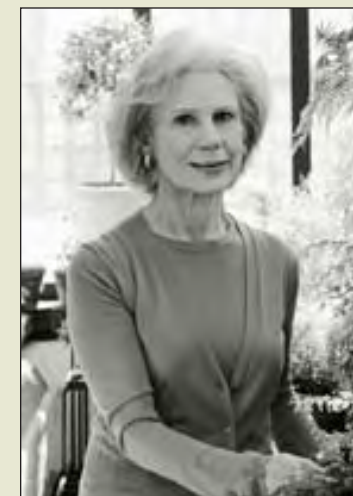
Twin Maples, Litchfield County, Connecticut

How does the Meadow-flower its bloom unfold?
Because the lovely little flower is free
Down to its root, and, in that freedom, bold;
And so the grandeur of the Forest-tree
Comes not by casting in a formal mould,
But from its own divine vitality.

– William Wordsworth,
“A Poet! – He hath put his heart to school”

In this sonnet, Wordsworth contrasts the freedom and strength of meadowland and forest with the formality of aesthetic rules that he believes weaken artistic creativity. I recalled this poem on a recent visit to Twin Maples, an estate in the northwest corner of Connecticut, as I meandered along paths through forty acres of wildflower meadows with grasses and seed heads towering over me. I have long admired naturally seeded roadside meadows along the Maine coast in late summer for their preponderance of Queen Anne’s lace, goldenrod, and fireweed. But here I was fascinated by an immense tract of meadow that had been very deliberately planted to become a major element in a vast garden scheme surrounded by forest. In this case, though, the rules governing the meadow’s seeding had released rather than hindered the natural growth of the native perennials mixed among its annuals, biennials, and grasses.

For the early settler, such meadows and pastures were valuable for their uses in husbandry and agriculture. The orderliness of fields and plantations and even orchards gave rise to horticulture in its more ornamental presentations. This particular expanse of more than four hundred acres was



Douglas Thomas. Photograph courtesy of John Gruen.

originally a land grant from George III, and Wilmer and Douglas Thomas, who live there now, are only the third recorded owners. Since the second owners treated the land as a conservancy, the character of the fields was intact when the Thomases bought it, crisscrossed only by low stone walls.

Having left behind a perfect Georgian house in Palm Beach, Florida, the Thomases have reproduced its admirable qualities in Connecticut. The result is a manor house conceived with precision and elegance by the architect and interior designer David Anthony Easton, who never failed to tweak conventional detailing to strengthen the house's connection to the land and the views beyond. Even inside feels like outside: one walks through the entry hall into an immense reception room cum winter garden where all manner of plants thrive in full sun throughout the year, from luxuriant baby tears to a hardy and voluptuous collection of specimen begonias. A balcony just beyond the Palladian windows overlooks a moon pond that is as pristine as the one at Studley Royal in Yorkshire. It marries the formal house to the surrounding wildflower fields.

Douglas Thomas, who was raised at Dockery Farms, the nineteenth-century family plantation that has been preserved in the Mississippi Delta, has a strong sense of the heritage of land. She speaks admiringly of Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C., where Mr. and Mrs. Robert Woods Bliss worked with the landscape gardener Beatrix Farrand to create a series of formal garden rooms that drift into a wild north vista at the edges of Georgetown. Like them, she says, she has been inspired "to create a major landscape in today's world."

Within the precincts of the house, the gardens remain formal, with a structural simplicity that complements the architecture. In a long rectangular garden outside the west portico, a frame of low box hedges – a tribute to the style of Russell Page – contains perimeter plantings of *Hydrangea paniculata* 'Quick Fire.' The corners are punctuated with yellow-fruited crab apple trees, and a handsome urn terminates the vista.

A moon gate encircled with *Hydrangea anomala subsp. petiolaris* north of this garden frames a view of a rocky outcrop on the wooded hillside behind the house. To prevent erosion, the horticulturalist, Deborah Munson, has imaginatively planted the rockery with combinations of lowbush blueberry, bearberry, cotoneaster, sweet fern, native potentilla, asters, Dutchman's pipe, Solomon's seal, American ginger, and hellebores – the latter being the first to bloom after Christmas.

Along a garden wall east of the house, espaliered with pears and apples, a long bed contains pink Sheffield chrysanthe-

mums that keep their bloom into late autumn. Within the walled enclosure, a traditional herbal knot garden is divided into four segments edged by low wattle fencing; its perennial borders display a palette of blue, peach, white, and silver. At the foot of the garden stands a dark-green, arched pergola, modeled after one at Dumbarton Oaks, through which one can glimpse a majestic fern-leaved beech – a visual bridge to the mysterious woodland beyond.

A second walled garden is a potager and cutting garden leading directly into a sturdy greenhouse made in Canada. It is the secret behind the eternal freshness of the household plants; they rest and rejuvenate here between appearances. The greenhouse, which has several different climatic zones, contains a collection of irresistible beauty and rarity. Planting benches and a custom-made galvanized aluminum table provide ample work spaces, but the pleasure is in the individual shapes and scents of the plants – each, like the prize-winning, cascading jade, with its own story.

However, all of these gardens are but a prelude to the true brilliance of the landscape setting: the wildflower meadows. Larry Weaner, the Pennsylvania landscape designer who created them, believes in places with what he calls "natural character." His visual concepts derive from the patterns and changes dis-

covered in the landscape rather than simply imposed upon it.

While originally trained in ornamental horticulture at the Pennsylvania College of Technology, in 1984 Weaner attended a three-day course on meadows at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Given by the environmental landscape architects A. E. Bye and Armistead W. Browning, Jr., it radically changed his approach to design. "I learned to see nature as not simply wild but as an interrelated scientific process of plants, soils and insects – and, furthermore, I saw how to make good use of these elements," he recalls. Bye himself was famous for understanding how England's eighteenth-century landscape designers became natural practitioners, believing, as Bye wrote, "that the native look of their land was disappearing, and that nature was not a threat to their security as it was in earlier times."

By the time Weaner arrived to study the land at Twin Maples, he already had to his credit seventy-five acres of meadow planting in zones along the New York Thruway. Unlike garden designers, who often approach the ground as a tabula rasa, Weaner first observed the land closely over time as an ecological habitat to determine what would grow there were it left undisturbed. Only then did he combine this knowledge with an aesthetic in making his seed selections. "Garden design overlaid on a scientific foundation," he calls it.

For the plantings in 2000, a list was drawn up of about one hundred species, including grasses, perennials, and some annuals or biennials, all of which could normally grow on the property. The actual seeding took place in early summer to suppress weeds, which grow more quickly in spring. Weaner says dry infertile soil is best, and no compost. He uses the Truax seed drill (invented by Jim Truax in the early 1970s to plant native prairie grasses in Minnesota), which is specially designed to accommodate the widely varying sizes and textures of native flower and grass seeds. The seeds are stored according to



A late fall view of the wildflower meadow looking south, with birch grove and white pine in the background.

size in three separate boxes and fed directly to the drills. The machine cuts furrows with eight separate tills; then the drills located behind the tills drop the seeds into the furrows and a wheel presses them into the soil. About twenty-five different flowers and five different grasses can be seeded during one operation.

That's all there is to it. The first year, the new meadows at Twin Maples were mowed four times; thereafter, only once a year, in April. Additional native species have periodically been planted in woodland, wetland, and garden areas since. The results are nothing short of spectacular – and, at times, unexpected, which makes the meadow a fascinating friend in daily life.

From the beginning the Thomases did some extensive planting of understory trees, which are now mature, eventually to replace what Douglas Thomas refers to as the “telephone pole” trees that had remained after the dramatic drive was laid out by her husband. The meadows appear framed within stands of larches and groves of birch trees, which have been limbed up to reveal the stark whiteness of their trunks. Seen from the house, the meadows appear like long, crested waves of color – yellow *Rudbeckia*, purple-blue *Monarda fistulosa*, deep pink *Echinacea* – among tall Indian and big bluestem grasses, to name only a few. Last summer, to everyone's surprise and delight, the annual fringed gentian bloomed, having taken its time to germinate over the preceding decade.

Larry Weaner told me he has another life as an amateur composer, and that he sees in music a rapport with garden design, especially in the creation of meadows. Indeed, his meadows are certainly orchestral in composition, incorporating many interrelated elements: on an early summer evening, the hues and whisperings of the perennials, annuals, and grasses, like the string section, are complicated and complemented by the swoop of birds, the alighting of butterflies, and the glimmer of fireflies among the long stems, together building to a visual crescendo.

In early November, the effect was more muted, the palette a russet brown; seed heads clustered far above my head. The circuitous mowed paths led me deep into the midst of this dense sea of grasses, and just as I felt enclosed, the path would open up to a clearing with a labyrinth of stones – or, in another direction, into an orchard of apple and peach trees whose gnarled trunks made them seem like ancient leftovers from an earlier farm. As I walked back to the house along the drive, I suddenly turned around. A brisk wind rustled and bent the tall grasses so that they did appear like an undulating sea, and beyond, in the distance, rolling in unison, was the borrowed landscape of the Litchfield Hills. – Paula Deitz

Books

Delirious New Orleans: Manifesto for an Extraordinary American City By Stephen Verderber

Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009

When the Yankee Doodle closed its doors in 2008, New Haven lost more than its most famous greasy spoon. The city also lost

a fantastic piece of signage that signaled the small diner's presence at the intersection of Elm and York Streets in the Broadway shopping district. A striking composition in red, white, and blue, the sign featured a jaunty figure wearing a buttoned tunic and folded toque who, perched above the doorway, strode purposefully into the space of the sidewalk with a cup of steaming coffee on a tray. The figure framed a carefully lettered text – “Yankee Doodle Coffee and Sandwich Shop” – that beckoned passersby into an intimate, vest-pocket space where a dozen or so stools faced the narrow lunch counter; behind it were chrome fixtures, a soda foun-

tain, and an array of small signs that stated the menu. There were many reasons, not all of them made public, why “the Doodle” – after three generations and nearly sixty years of serving patrons from both sides of the town/gown divide – finally called it quits. Suffice it to say that nostalgia does not

pay the rent and a family business is by nature idiosyncratic. But even if you never tucked into a “Dandy” (double hamburger

with bacon, lettuce, tomato), or delighted in a butter-fried donut, you might still miss the presence and patina of an old place and the vibrant sign that was its calling card.

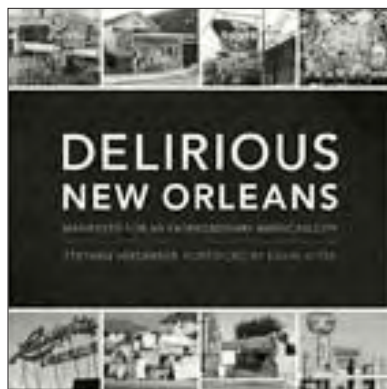
Vintage signs delight us in part because they are anachronistic. Hand-lettered or rendered in a blaze of neon, they are talismans of a passing age in retail and its tradition of small-scale proprietorship. When local businesses succumb to well-heeled competition like chain stores and shopping centers, so recedes the stock of quirky, one-off signage designed to attract the pass-

ing pedestrian or motorist on the busy commercial street. As they grow scarcer, the old signs become collector's items. They appear in glamorous photography books that tantalize with graphic appeal, neon emblems of a vanishing America.

In *Delirious New Orleans: A Manifesto for an Extraordinary City*, the author's main theme is commercial vernacular architecture and the extraordinary, cumulative meaning that these everyday, if offbeat, buildings, signs, and artifacts have in our sense of place and belonging. The project began when architect Stephen Verderber, then teaching at Tulane University's School of Architecture, embarked on a self-described “delirious” mission to photograph the city's rich collection of roadside architecture and artifacts that he had come to appreciate. After Katrina, the displaced author returned to New Orleans and the specific sites of his original photographs to document the wreckage. The first chapter is devoted to this photographic record. In subsequent chapters, he goes on to look in more detail at both the development of commercial vernacular architecture in New Orleans and the murals and other forms of “folk architecture” that, especially in the city's African American neighborhoods, contribute so much to the city's soul. One chapter explores

the role of civic ritual, amusement parks, and architectural follies in the formation and reinforcement of the city's racial geography – a segregated social landscape that was brutally exposed in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and in the uneven distribution of its impact. Another analyzes the deployment of Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) trailers – those toxic white boxes that came to represent the malfeasance of our government's response to the disaster – and emphasizes the instances of their independent appropriation.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Verderber wrote this “manifesto” to guide architects, city planners, and citizens in the remaking of New Orleans and to offer lessons to other cities grappling with urban change. His title calls out to the Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and his 1978 book *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan*. Koolhaas, though, was careful to qualify his use of manifesto “in an age disgusted with them.” His poetical text – evoking the city's grid, Coney Island, the skyscraper, and Rockefeller Center – stressed rich description and vivid analysis over prescriptions or polemics. And, after all, it was a manifesto for an urban



future that was already, if imperfectly, built. Verderber, in his nostalgia for the icons and institutions of the American roadside, is less coy about his belief in the importance of recognizing and preserving them. In his engaging and amply illustrated book, he argues that the buildings and signs of the strip must be preserved because they are central to the meaningful recovery and remaking of New Orleans.

Popular images of New Orleans architecture include the cast-iron balconies of the French Quarter, the above-ground tombs of the city's cemeteries, and the narrow shotgun houses that have historically housed the city's poor. But Verderber calls attention to a feature of New Orleans that, even if it is composed of completely unique elements, is common to most American cities – the indiscreet charms of the highway strip. Among the author's photographs of the city's exuberant signage are images of the streamlined neon of 1940s-era lounges, oversized sculptures of root-beer mugs for the regional chain of Frostop drive-in restaurants, starburst aesthetic and theme motels of the 1950s, and a variety of other artistic neon creations for businesses ranging from flower shops to bakeries. Or consider the case of South Claiborne Hardware. Sometime in the 1950s, proprietors mounted an oversized

plywood pinup girl, in denim overalls, on an adjustable monkey wrench. "It has been the source of some distraction to motorists for decades," writes Verderber.

This type of study is a welcome addition to the research tradition that takes seriously the formation and meaning of the ordinary landscape, celebrating its discord as opposed to insisting on its depravity. Historically, the highway strip was the perennial *bête noire* of urban critics. It represented the reign of the unplanned and undesigned in the American landscape, what the architect and critic Peter Blake called "God's Own Junkyard." Grady Clay called the strip the "dirty old man of the urban scene," and it was at the front line of what planners Christopher Tunnard and Boris Pushkarev identified as the battle between chaos and control in the built environment. As early as 1931, in fact, Benton MacKaye and Lewis Mumford expressed the hope of many reformers with a proposal for "townless highways," a model for limited-access parkways that would eliminate the clutter of private intrusions on the visual and social realms of the highway.

Verderber rejects the paternalistic view of the strip and takes inspiration from

writers like John Brinckerhoff Jackson, who saw an emerging American folk art in the "flamboyant entrances and deliberately bizarre decorative effects" of highway architecture and signage. By taking seriously the local interventions of the commercial vernacular landscape, Verderber places himself in league with Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, and Steven Izenour, the influential trio whose 1972 *Learning from Las Vegas*, based on the results of a Yale School of Architecture study, analyzed the spatial logic of the strip and its system of communication based on signage. If critics pointed to the strip as a debased example of American hucksterism and throwaway culture, the Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour team found an "architecture of persuasion" that might even serve as a model for new architecture.

One of the most interesting aspects of *Delirious New Orleans* is Verderber's analysis of how residential buildings are adapted to commercial functions by adding what he calls "masker buildings" to the original structure. The Coin Laundry on South Claiborne, for example, was originally a cross-gabled, Craftsman-style house, probably built around 1920. The original house was set back from the street to allow for a modest front yard. But the street soon developed as an important

automobile route and the owners of the house found themselves in a strategic location for commercial uses. City planners recognized this, too. As traffic became more intense on arteries such as South Claiborne, many of them were rezoned to allow commercial or light-industrial uses. The owners could build a commercial extension to the street – masking the original facade – and continue to live in the house behind the new store. In the case of the Coin Laundry, the addition, executed in the late 1920s or early 1930s, was essentially a simple wooden box with a stucco-clad frontispiece (a kind of mask on top of a mask) that, with its horizontal grooves and central parapet made of vertical strips, gave the extension a bit of art deco styling. Verderber produces a series of analytical drawings in axonometric perspective to illustrate how each commercial mask is wrapped around, on top, or in front of an original building, allowing new programmatic opportunities (restaurant, hardware store, electronics service shop) and reintroducing the building to the street. The drawings help explain a common building process in American cities and show how the accumulation of

individual, small-scale adaptations gives shape to our streets and neighborhoods.

If Verderber has a generous appreciation for the vernacular, the indigenous, and the bottom-up, it is matched by his suspicion and downright contempt for initiatives and grandiose schemes that are imposed on a population from the top down, whether by government, philanthropists, or real-estate interests. Unfortunately, the destruction wrought by Hurricane Katrina exceeded the damage of even the most malevolent developer or ill-fated urban-renewal scheme. In the aftermath, FEMA shipped tens of thousands of trailers to New Orleans to serve as temporary, emergency housing. While planners and politicians debated rebuilding strategies, these trailers became the de facto building blocks of an emerging, post-Katrina urbanism. As physical homes, the trailers left a lot to be desired. They were cramped, poorly designed and constructed, ill-ventilated, and susceptible to fire, all despite the considerable cost of producing and deploying each unit. Even more distressing was the lack of coordination between FEMA's many subcontractors, leading to long delays in distributing and installing the trailers and in connecting them to electricity and other basic services. The trailers were not built for long-term habitation. But FEMA made living in them

even less hospitable by grouping them in enclaves without adequate access to basic amenities, especially food. With the diagramming technique he used to analyze the "masking" architecture, Verderber scrutinizes the patterns of FEMA trailer installation "across a delirious and devastated landscape," and explores some of the NIMBY ("not in my backyard") controversies that erupted around the location of these camps.

In the face of the government's shocking incompetence, other forces stepped forward to try to respond to the need. But in their ways, many of them were equally problematic. One such high-profile effort was spearheaded by actor Brad Pitt, who set out to rebuild houses in the Lower Ninth Ward – an area of the city that many planners concede might not, and even should not, come back as it was – by commissioning prestigious architects from around the globe to generate new takes on the shotgun house. Architect Andrés Duany, a founder of the Congress for the New Urbanism, also came to the Gulf Coast to lead a series of "charrettes" (meetings of planners, architects, and the public) with community members in several of the city's parishes. The charrettes

took on a “delirious, surreal atmosphere all their own,” Verderber writes. “How was a homeless, shell-shocked audience to take seriously . . . the romanticized images of canals, idyllic footbridges, and pastoral town squares presented to them by Duany and his team?” Putting aside the glaring question of who was going to pay for all of those idyllic footbridges, the New Urbanist approach – tastefully dressed up in the trappings of an idealized neighborhood – was another example of a solution coming from outside the community rather than being a homegrown enterprise.

In a surprising twist, Verderber takes the FEMA trailers and uses them as an example of the city’s enterprising spirit. While most of the trailers were grouped in monotonous, isolated camps, there were instances of “untethered” trailers that found their way to the commercial strip, where proprietors set up mom-and-pop food operations. And there were renegade occupants who defied FEMA’s rules against personalizing or altering the trailer’s exterior. “In roadside commercial contexts, [they] applied neon signs and related advertisements to the banal, characterless trailers.” In the messy, individualized appropriations of the trailer – untethered from the often sterile and underserved enclaves in

which they were placed – Verderber recognized the seeds of urban rebirth in the tradition of the chaotic highway strip that he unabashedly celebrates.

In the poignant essay that closes his book, Verderber veers a bit from his established themes to recall the plight of the St. Frances Xavier Cabrini Church in the Gentilly district of New Orleans. The church, erected in 1963, was demolished in 2007 despite having survived Katrina in decent shape. Verderber was a parishioner at the church and worked at length to preserve the structure, which he saw as crucial to the parish’s sense of place. Despite establishing the historic significance of the church (designed by the noted, regional-modernist firm of Curtis & Davis), the availability of alternative plans that would have accommodated both the church and a new school to be built there, and several efforts to secure a legal injunction, the diocese went ahead with the demolition for its own reasons. The author was clearly stung, and he speaks directly to those who oversaw the destruction of the church: “Shame on all of you who worked to bring about the senseless loss of Cabrini Church and its parishioners’ cultural and spiritual legacy.” This essay,

while moving, is also somewhat jarring. Although this is a story about a failed preservation effort, a monumental and high-design church has very little to do with the kind of streetwise, ad hoc urbanism that Verderber has championed over the course of his book. And yet this personal remark again brings home the fact that the places in which we live, shop, and worship are at the core of who we really are.

Although many readers will share the author’s affection for the commercial landscape so lushly documented here, we remain uncertain of how to apply the question of preservation to commercial structures. The commercial landscape is by nature transient because the ways we buy and sell are always changing and cannot be frozen in time. In New Orleans, these changes were dramatically exacerbated by Hurricane Katrina, but the truth is that the commercial strip as celebrated by Verderber was already dying, replaced by both big-box stores at one end of the spectrum and online shopping at the other, just as the arterial streets themselves have been largely replaced by interstate highways. We build up sentimental and aesthetic bonds to buildings and signage related to old businesses, but who will be financially responsible for their preservation when they are no longer economically

viable? To be sure, there is some room in the contemporary cultural economy of cities for nostalgia, history, and curatorship of the built environment. There are some neighborhoods where it is a sophisticated sign of distinction and authenticity for a new store to preserve the vintage signage associated with a previous tenant. But every commercial sign cannot become a sentimental relic. If that were the case we would live in a city full of empty signifiers and might lose a grip on precisely that sense of place that the signs had at one point helped to produce.

Still, there is no denying that, for many, the local bar or diner can serve a function like that of a church – as a common space where people come together. I even think it’s possible that some New Haveners came to worship at the church of the Yankee Doodle, with its syrupy vanilla cokes pulled from the soda fountain; to witness Lewis Beckwith, the founder, and then his son Lou, and finally his grandson Rick, smear butter on a thin hamburger patty hot off the grid-dle. Many will miss the sustenance it provided, both gustatory and spiritual, for it represented the spirit of a time and place that is now past. Certainly the absence of its sign near the corner of Elm and York Street was a

shock. But should it have been preserved in place? A phantom presence that signified local authenticity despite the fact that its source was gone? No matter how much we miss the Doodle, it is difficult to imagine a satisfying way for that sign to have been preserved. The sign’s value as an object was bound up with the lives of the people who ran the enterprise and displayed it. And if people, not splendid signage, make up the soul of a place, then that spirit may as likely be found in a FEMA trailer as in vivid enamel and neon.
– Elihu Rubin

Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer
By Novella Carpenter
New York: Penguin Press, 2009

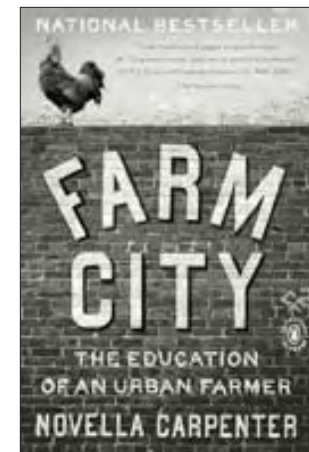
The title of this delightful memoir about raising meat and potatoes in the Oakland ghetto is not an easy one to remember. Certain nouns – “country” and “girl,” “oil” and “slick” – pair together nicely, but “farm” and “city” are not among them. In fact the two words even repel each other slightly, so that seeing them yoked together creates a jarring,

almost surreal effect, like Robert Rauschenberg’s Angora goat with the tire around its middle.

In one sense, Novella Carpenter is out to change all that. She is a full-fledged urban farmer – growing melons in the yard, extracting honey in the living room, and slaughtering ducks in the bathtub – and she’d love it if more of us were doing the same. But what makes this book at once vastly pleasurable, deeply weird, and very, very funny is that so far she’s one of the few people crazy enough to try it – and she’s learning on the fly. In both her book and her apartment, she’s doing nothing less than remaking the urban environment. Rauschenberg’s goat would be right at home in her yard. In 2003, when Carpenter and her boyfriend, Bill,

abandon Seattle for Oakland, California, their new hometown has the highest murder rate in the country: a man is shot dead just a few blocks away the day they move in. On the upside, there’s a Buddhist temple across the

street, a friendly vegetarian named Lana with a pet



guinea pig down the block, and a big vacant lot just behind their apartment. Forsaken houses and ruined businesses are so common in the neighborhood, in fact, that the local residents call it Ghost Town. To the new arrivals, though, the empty lot is not a memory but a vegetable garden waiting to happen.

Carpenter is no dewy-eyed sentimentalist, and she makes that clear from the start, just so nobody gets the wrong idea. “I have a farm on a dead-end street in the ghetto,” she begins. “My backstairs are dotted with chicken turds. Bales of straw come undone in the parking area next to my apartment.” She is, however, a romantic, and she believes that farming is in her genes; her parents were back-to-the-land hippies who tried homesteading in Idaho soon after she and her sister were born. Unfortunately, the smokehouse burned down and the dog had to be shot; her father would go off hunting for days, leaving her mother alone with the children and chores. So why not farm in town, where there’s always something going on, and you can be surrounded by other people?

In Carpenter’s view, being an urban farmer involves more than tending a few stalks of corn and some tomato vines in the back yard. Even chickens don’t really count. It isn’t until the

author decides to raise her own turkeys for Thanksgiving dinner and orders a combo package of meat birds from the Murray McMurray Hatchery website that she begins to feel like the real thing. A few days later, the mail carrier drives up with ten chicks, two ducklings, two goslings, and two turkeys – whom Lana’s sister promptly christens Harold and Maude.

Certainly, the arrival of the birds – and then the rabbits, and then the pigs – keeps Carpenter hopping at her city farm, but of equal interest are all the other warm-blooded animals making their homes on this dead-end street. Lana, we learn, runs a speakeasy every week in her warehouse. The monks cook large vats of rice on the sidewalk and share their food with the hungry. Mr. Nguyen, the Vietnamese neighbor who lives downstairs, tends his own small patch of taro and chrysanthemum. And Bobby, an elderly black man who sleeps in an abandoned car nearby, sweeps the glass off the block every evening.

As the author becomes less wary of her new neighborhood she ventures further afield – by bike, on foot – to look for delectable weeds for her rabbits, or to pick wild plums from the rotting roof of an abandoned

carport. The grocer talks to her about beekeeping in Yemen and the local children show her how to shoot dice. Slowly, too, the street ventures into the garden. Some people ask for food, others steal it. Neighbors drop by to gossip, or with seeds for her to plant, or to complain about the smell of the pigs. Children come around to marvel at the rabbits. Friends arrive to help her kill her first turkey. Carpenter’s tiny but thriving enterprise becomes not an alternative to the street’s ecology but a part of it. Farm city.

Although readers might initially be distracted by the author’s agricultural machismo, she proves to be as much at home in the library and the kitchen as she is in the pigsty. Her narrative is pleasingly interspersed with references to Wendell Berry and Henry David Thoreau and Anthony Bourdain; nineteenth-century market gardens in Paris; the history of animal husbandry; sharing behaviors among primates. She pores over copies of *The Whole Earth Catalogue* and *Stalking the Wild Asparagus* and *Charcuterie and French Pork Cookery*. She even hectors Bill about the sins of wastefulness by reading aloud passages from M. F. K. Fisher’s *How to Cook a Wolf*. But finally the learning is in the doing, and Carpenter is appealingly game in her attempts to expand her expertise. She gets up to

a lot of things in this book, like winemaking and swarm capturing, passing along helpful hints as she learns them herself. (Postal workers are alarmed by packages of bees. A chicken tractor is a worthwhile investment. Don’t transport manure in your car.)

One of the book’s ironic reversals is that just as many rural farmers have become dependent on urban centers to sell their goods, Carpenter can’t quite break all ties with the country: every once in a while she has to jump in the car and leave town to go pick grapes or buy a pig. Most entertaining, though, are her attempts to have it all right at home, such as when she and Bill decide to feed their pigs exclusively from the spectacularly varied cuisines available in the city’s dumpsters, or when she tries to subsist for the month of July entirely on the produce of her farm, food received from barter, and wild forage. “The 100-yard diet had so heightened my senses, I started to see food everywhere. Every shrub, tree, and weed I encountered quivered with potential usefulness,” she recalls. “I could also smell a hot dog a mile away.” Hunger and moral righteousness, she discovers, are not an appealing combination.

For Carpenter, a love of food leads to a love of farming: it’s good to know where your dinner comes from. Conversely, as even the most rudimentary vegetable gardener knows, nothing tastes quite like a tomato you’ve succeeded in growing yourself – and yes, for Carpenter, the same holds true for bacon. With animals, though, the equation is obviously more complicated, and she doesn’t shy away from those complications. There is a lot of death in this book, as there is on any farm – some intentional, some accidental, some at her hands and some at the hands of others – and the author’s musings about the cycles of consuming and being consumed are unfailingly engaging.

Finally, however, it is the unexpected as much as the inevitable that makes this memoir so seductive. In one suspenseful scene in *Farm City*, Maude, one of the heritage turkeys, ventures beyond the safety of her own yard and flutters over a high fence to meet the neighbors who live behind the auto shop: a Rottweiler and a pit bull. The tale of a farm fowl dying in the teeth of predators is a familiar one, of course, but it has never been told quite like this – with a long aside on the difficulties of climbing a chain-link fence to rescue your bird. Yes, Carpenter explains, as a ghetto resident she has had plenty of opportunities

to watch and learn the technique:

Every once in a while there is a car chase down MLK: squealing tires, police sirens, engines opening up. If the pursued car careens around our corner, it soon encounters a dead end: a schoolyard circled by a twenty-foot-tall fence. Not having options, the car thieves usually throw open the car door and sprint to the fence. I timed them once: five seconds to get to the top. The cops got out of their cars, lights flashing, and watched them climb away to freedom.

But watching is not the same as doing, and, in Maude’s moment of desperate need, Carpenter discovers that she is a terrible fence climber:

I got a startling reality check into what remarkable physical strength it took to scramble up a chain-link fence. The metal cut into my hands; my toes were jammed painfully into the small openings. Once near the top, I had to negotiate to an area without razor wire. My biceps quivered. I was a weak Spider-Woman. I yelled discouraging words to the dogs in my best stern voice: “No. Bad dogs! No.”

Unsurprisingly, Maude is beyond rescue by the time Carpenter hits the asphalt. (“There was only one way that scenario – turkey meets dogs – could have played out.”) And yet the scene itself is still surprising, because the author defeats our stylistic and thematic expectations at every turn: the tension of a turkey’s murder is improbably drawn out by burning rubber and police sirens; the effort of protecting a farm animal inspires respect for the athletic prowess of a car thief; and the impatient reader realizes that there may be moments in life when urban crime suddenly seems less important than what’s happening to a pea-brained turkey.

In the end, we come to think of Carpenter herself as an amalgam of contradictions, a sort of gimlet-eyed utopian who believes that we are all, in a sense, living on borrowed land, and that we should therefore perhaps redefine our notions of community and survival. Take what you need, she suggests, and give back what you can. Surplus tomatoes for the Black Panther tutoring program, honey for the Yemeni grocer. Wild plums when you’re hungry, fish guts and

discarded Yummy House cakes for the pigs. Throw some rotted horse manure on your dreams, don’t fence out your neighbors, and something miraculous might happen, right on the street where you live. – Alice Truax

Parks, Plants, and People

By Lynden Miller

New York: Norton, 2009

Today renowned as a designer of public spaces, Lynden B. Miller’s professional turf is the urban park and city square. Her book *Parks, Plants, and People* (2009) is in part the

story of her present career. It began in 1982 in the Conservatory Garden at the Harlem end of Central Park, when she accepted the newly formed Central Park Conservancy’s challenge to restore – or better, to re-create – the tripartite, Beaux Arts garden that Commissioner Robert Moses had inserted into Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux’s Romantic landscape in 1936. Her success and the widespread acclaim the garden received encouraged Miller, who was then a painter, to trade in

her artist’s palette for one comprised of flats of plants.

Miller’s artist’s eye has aided her over the past three decades in her creation of several public gardens that adorn parks and campuses in New York City and elsewhere. Their painterly array of ornamental plants would not have thrived under the conditions of heavy use and environmental stress if her

designs were not grounded in sound horticultural knowledge. *Parks, Plants, and People* is thus both a tour of several beautified public landscapes and a primer for making garden art, whether public or private.

Throughout she refers to Elizabeth von Arnim, Gertrude Jekyll, Vita Sackville-West, Louise Beebe Wilder, and other earlier garden writers whom she counts as her literary companions and mentors. For instance, in a long chapter titled “The Art of Garden Design,” Miller starts off

by saying:

To my eye, the ideal composition is one that looks almost unplanned – but this actually requires careful planning and experience with plants. The great English gardener and writer Vita Sackville-West called this kind of gardening “a kind of haphazard luxuriance, which of course comes neither by hap nor hazard at all.” This type of planting may look as if some invisible hand had just dropped the plants here and there, but the effect takes considerable organization and definition.

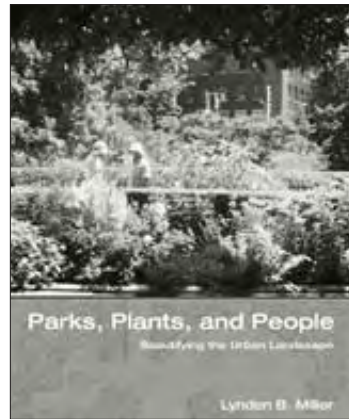
The mixed border – a long bed in which bulbs, perennials, annuals, shrubs, and low-growing trees combine to create a tapestry of plants – is Miller’s particular specialty. During the 1970s when she lived in England she looked with an attentive eye at the mixed borders contained within a structural framework of paths, walls, and hedges at Sackville-West’s Sissinghurst, Christopher Lloyd’s Great Dixter, and Lawrence Johnson’s Hidcote – all places where gardening is demonstrated to be one of the fine arts. Practicing the lessons she learned from their creators and other proponents of this form of garden design – Rosemary Verey and Penelope Hobhouse, to

name the most recent – Miller aims to teach her readers how to create compositions of plants that provide visual interest during the four seasons of the year. To do this, of course, requires an approach to gardening as a science in which the variables of time and weather need to be understood. “If you know your plants well,” she writes, “you will have no reason to leave a park or garden devoid of plant pleasures in winter. Evergreen foliage, interesting bark, and colorful berries are the joys of the season.”

The words “if you know your plants well” are, of course, key. As Jekyll observed, “Many people begin their gardening by thinking that the making and maintaining of a well-filled flower border is quite an easy matter. In fact it is one of the most difficult problems in the whole range of horticultural practice.” To make her borders, Miller thinks of form, texture, and color, giving one section to trees and shrubs, with flowering dogwoods, magnolias, and broad-leaved evergreens such as holly (for winter color) taking pride of place; one to perennials, which she calls “the flesh” on the garden’s “bones” (here she recommends a host of sun- and

shade-loving species, with a nod to her reliable favorites: *Helleborus*, *Alchemilla*, *Anemone*, *Geranium*, *Salvia*, *Sedum*, *Thalictrum*, *Hosta*, and *Yucca*); one to grasses, such as several varieties of *Miscanthus sinensis* along with oat grass (*Helictotrichon sempervirens*) and golden Japanese forest grass (*Hakonechloa macra* ‘Aureola’); one to annuals, including a star performer, *Ageratum houstonianum* ‘Blue Horizon’ (floss flower); one to biennials like *Digitalis* (foxglove); one to bulbs, including *Allium*, the ornamental onion plant; one to native plants, with *Hydrangea quercifolia* (oakleaf hydrangea) being her favorite.

Once you have your palette – this means a large catalogue of mental images of plants and an informed sense of their seasonal growth habits – you then need to master the elements of design: foliage contrast, repetition, form, line, scale, and color. Here Miller shows how the large, smooth, blue leaves of a hosta contrast with the “thin, yellow-green strappy leaves” of golden Japanese forest grass; how softly undulating grasses repeat the flow of falling water; how the necessary “crisp discipline” of an edge is softened by the way a plant is allowed to spill over it; how hedges create sight lines and at the same time serve to



contain exuberant plantings; how complementary colors such as blue and orange or a single color in many different shades can create an effective design.

Like other good garden writers she cannot omit discussing soil: “Ideally it should be dark brown and smell fresh, and it should make a ball in your hand when you squeeze it. If the soil is in good condition your hands will hold millions of invisible microorganisms, more than there are people on the face of the planet.” She recommends soil testing by one’s state extension service or a private company; soil amendment to relieve compaction, poor drainage, or nutrient deficiencies; and various types of compost – the gardener’s gold – to meet the demands of different kinds of plants.

Public sector gardeners must deal with the same vagaries of weather and infuriating depredations of garden pests as private gardeners. But they have other challenges to overcome as well, as Miller makes clear in a final chapter devoted to the subject. Having on site an enthusiastic, trained gardener capable of communicating with the public; selecting the right kinds of plants, prefer-

ably ones that are beautiful during at least three seasons; protecting them with unobtrusive temporary fencing while they are getting established; and preventing injurious salt and chemicals used to remove snow on paths from leaching into the soil are just some of the things that must be added to regular good maintenance practices such as watering, weeding, pruning, mulching, and so forth. Miller believes that public gardens are cynosures of the city and symbols of good urbanism. In this respect, the word “people” in her title is significant. “Well-maintained parks tell people that their city cares about them and give them a compelling reason to remain in the city,” she concludes, a belief she affirms with an anecdote:

A visitor once said to me, after experiencing the Conservatory Garden for the first time, that she had intended to leave New York, but if there was a place like this in the city, she wasn’t leaving. . . . With so much to divide us, one thing seems common to us all: everyone loves to be surrounded by something beautiful.

Her motto is “Make it gorgeous and they will come; keep it that way and they will help you.”

– Elizabeth Barlow Rogers

Contributors

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Paula Deitz is editor of the *Hudson Review*, a magazine of literature and the arts published in New York City. As a cultural critic, she writes about art, architecture, and landscape design for newspapers and magazines here and abroad. *Of Gardens*, a collection of her essays, has recently been published by the University of Pennsylvania Press.

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