

Green the Free Space

by Amanda B. Hickman

According to legend, a legend maybe invented by the wandering tramp who passed it on to me, pirates and hoboes once started gardens in ports and secret places, coming back to them at regular intervals to weed and to reap their harvest. Maybe for the mystique of it, maybe to avoid detection and live off the land, hobos and pirates would keep secret gardens wherever they could find land. I imagine the roving river rats from Chocolat scrambling up a hill on a misty central European morning to weed onions and gather a small apple harvest. He did have pictures, this hobo, of pirate plots his friends in Spain laid in the mountains outside Barcelona. Berry brambles and tidy rows of onions and greens, growing surreptitiously in a forest clearing, the way you might expect to see someone's opium empire or ganga garden, tucked away on land that isn't theirs.

According to more verifiable legend, New York City was in the middle of an economic disaster by the mid 70s. The rumors go all directions about where the tenements went. Some people will tell you that building owners were torching their own buildings, hoping to collect the insurance get out of a floundering market. Others will point out that the city tightened its belt in part by closing firehouses, they say that the fire department could not respond to fires fast enough no matter how they started, so buildings burned to the ground. Landlords walked away from unprofitable buildings and snowballing city property tax debts, and apartments just started to crumble.

A tremendous amount of both public and private land was just abandoned. Wherever the vacant lots came from, it was up to families left in the standing tenements, surrounded by rubble, to let drug dealers set up shop or claim the space themselves. All over New York City in the 70s and 80s neighbors carted out bricks, stoves, couches, threadbare tires, broken weight sets, dirty needles and broken glass. In place of the endless garbage, they built vegetable plots and club houses, called *casitas* in Puerto Rico. Groups of families started seeds and planted trees and made little gardens in vacant lots all over the city. These were by no means the first community gardens, but New York City's gardens blossomed during the economic crisis.

By the time they became gardens, most of these lots were technically owned by the city. The original landlords owed more in back taxes than the land was worth, and the city didn't know what to do with the lots either. So the city parks department formed Project Greenthumb in 1978 to encourage neighborhood revitalization while preserving open space.

By the late 90s, the economic tide had shifted dramatically and developers, some of them also generous campaign donors, were thirsting over lots in the East Village and around the city. The city began a massive campaign of auctioning off the lots to the highest bidder, and sparked a huge fight between the gardeners and garden neighbors and the mayor. Open space advocates argued that after 20 years, these gardens constituted open space, no matter how they were technically zoned. They asked the city to give communities a chance to review plans to develop on garden lots. The city

This and more online at www.wburg.com.

was having none of it and lot after lot went on the auction block. The gardeners made enough noise that a few private organizations stepped in preserve some of the gardens through land trusts.

If you want to start a garden of your own, now is the time to start. Your first step is finding the land, and you'd be surprised at how much is out there. In 1999, when the gardens were being auctioned off, the New York City Garden Trust was formed to buy up whole bundles of vacant lots, all of which had been gardens at some point, but many of which were no longer being tended. The Garden Trust is a great resource, and they have a few empty lots in North Brooklyn that are ready to become gardens. Project Greenthumb's Brooklyn coordinator can direct you to semi-abandoned gardens that need membership, or you can go the pirate route. A few years ago, someone staked out a few feet of sidewalk alongside a parking lot on Broadway where the slate had been upturned leaving the dirt exposed. They planted tidy rows of tomatoes and peppers right on the sidewalk. They dug in a white picket fence even, but no one tended it this summer, and the trash and mugwort seem to have taken over. The fence is still there, upturned by ailanthus roots. I would love nothing more than to see the sidewalk bloom again. My downstairs neighbor grew bell peppers in the tree box in front of our building in Greenpoint, but she spends most days sitting at the window yelling at the girl down the street who lets her dog piss on people's flowers. I am not sure the peppers are worth the fight.

NYPIRG is a good place to start if you want to find out about a lot yourself: <http://www.cmap.nypirg.org/CENYC/cenycmapsearch.asp?view=default>, use the Neighborhood pulldown to see a map of Williamsburg or Greenpoint that will show the status of every lot. For most lots, clicking "More Information" will give you the name and address of the lot's owner.

The trick, though, is to start now. Figure you read this story once and go for a walk to look at other gardens. Greenthumb & Garden Trust folks are out in the field most of the day and take forever to return phone calls, so you won't get your hands on a lot right away. When you do get a hold of them, they will want to know that you really mean to do this. It helps if you have a few people gathered already. Try to keep regular hours and put up a sign explaining when you will be around to clear the lot, and you will find neighbors trickle in to help and find out what is going on, even if they have seen it before. If you are starting with a vacant lot, you will have your hands full carting out rubbish and mugwort and deciding what you want to grow there when you are done. Not all the rubbish will be things you can carry off on your own. The Department of Sanitation will help you reckon with abandoned cars (with no plates) and the 91st precinct can help you move cars that still have plates but have been abandoned in the lot. Greenthumb will send out a bobcat to level the land if it is really uneven, and if you are on a Garden Trust lot, they will help you get a dumpster if you need to empty a lot of rubbish.

Greenthumb will give active gardens a few cubic yards of clean soil to get started, and they will provide finished compost from the department of sanitation to gardens that have an active composting system in place. Sometime in the spring, (check their website: <http://www.nyccompost.org/resources/calendar.html> or phone for the date—it hasn't been announced just yet), the NYC Compost Project opens their gates to let gardeners cart out mulch from last year's Christmas trees and fall leaves. You

will want to have a place to put your soil by the time you are ready to plant in spring. Once you start to move the trash out of the way, you can ask Pat Jasitis at the Brooklyn Botanical Garden's Urban Composting Project to help you build rat-proof compost bins. If you end up in a Garden Trust lot, their Americorps Volunteers can help you find pallets to build bins out of, and Pat will show you how to line the bins with chickenwire.

All of that and what will you have by spring? A nice clean empty lot. Whew. Now it's time to take the seeds you started on your window sill and put them in the ground. Greenthumb can help you get wood to build raised beds in, and if you are planning on growing vegetables or eating anything that comes out of the garden, you want to either conduct extensive soil tests or plant in good soil and compost, in raised beds.

For a little inspiration, take a tour of Williamsburg's existing community gardens. Even on an icy day, you can be dreaming of spring. Wintering gardens are so sparse that they seem full of possibility.

P.S. 19 on South 3rd opens their garden, the **Kids Garden**, daily during school hours. If you've got a few young horticulturists interested in your own garden, you might take a look at how they have divided their space into manageable plots for smaller arms.

Starting in East Williamsburg, **Williamsburg Garden**, on Scholes Street between Manhattan and Graham Avenues was formed in 1986, across from a paved schoolyard on a dense residential block. The plots are arranged in tidy rows, with a cover crop of rye for the winter, and the gardeners say they try to open it most days, even in the winter. Their cherry, apple and peach trees are bare, but a thrilling reminder of what can happen if you stick to a garden year after year. Also in East Williamsburg, on Ten Eyck Street, the **Ten Eyck Garden** between Lorimer & Union Avenue, is open Tues 6-8, Thurs 6-8, Fri 6-7. Another spot, on Makibbin between Manhattan and Graham is open daily.

Heading into the Southside, my favorite true pirate garden has fallen into complete disrepair on the corner of Broadway and Wythe, but there are some real gardens, too. **Berry Street Garden**, on Berry between South 2nd & South 3rd, is one of the oldest in Williamsburg. Their serpentine windblock of young junipers that block the inside from view—lovely to sit inside it, but hard to get a sense of the space from outside so be sure to stop in when the gates are open. Monday, Wednesday, & Friday 5-7.

El Puente Earth Spirit Garden, on South 2nd Street between Roebling & Driggs, is home to the Espirito Tierra Community Park and Environmental Learning Center. The garden was designed by students from the El Puente Academy for Peace and Justice, and has a medicinal herb garden, beautifully rescued cobblestone paths and a gazebo that wraps around a grand tree off to one side. They open their gates on Tuesdays from 12-5, though the site is worth looking at even if you can't make their open hours.

Further out South 2nd, between Roebling and Havemeyer, is **Vela Que Lebron**, once known as El Bohio Boricua. Another formally laid out, if sprawling, garden, they have built a *casita*, a welcoming gazebo, and a horse named Silver. Silver alone is worth the trip, though the garden is in desperate need of a trash pick up day. They are open daily, even in the rain the gazebo is dry enough for dominoes. On the Northside, the **Greendome Garden**, North 12th Street at Union, in the westmost corner of McCarren

Park is open from dusk till dawn every day, and if you drop a note in their sign box, someone will let you know about work days. It might be one of the most tranquil spots in Williamsburg. They don't have a whole lot of vegetables growing, but if you think that gardens have to be planted in tidy rows and rectangular boxes, Greendome's winding cobblestone planters should set you straight.

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RESOURCES

The NYC Garden Trust is part of the New York Restoration Project they should have new Americorps Volunteers soon who will be in charge of Brooklyn.
718/537-5123

Project Greenthumb
www.greenthumbnyc.org
Brooklyn Coordinator:
Alice Brooke Wilson
(212) 788-8060
or
Harold Paynter
(212) 788-8076

Brooklyn Greenbridge
Brooklyn Botanic Garden
1000 Washington Avenue
<http://www.bbg.org/gar2/topics/urban/greenbridge/index.html>

Urban Composting Project
Brooklyn Botanic Garden
Pat Jasaitis, Compost Coordinator
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