



# The Benefits of Community-Managed Open Space: Community Gardening in New York City

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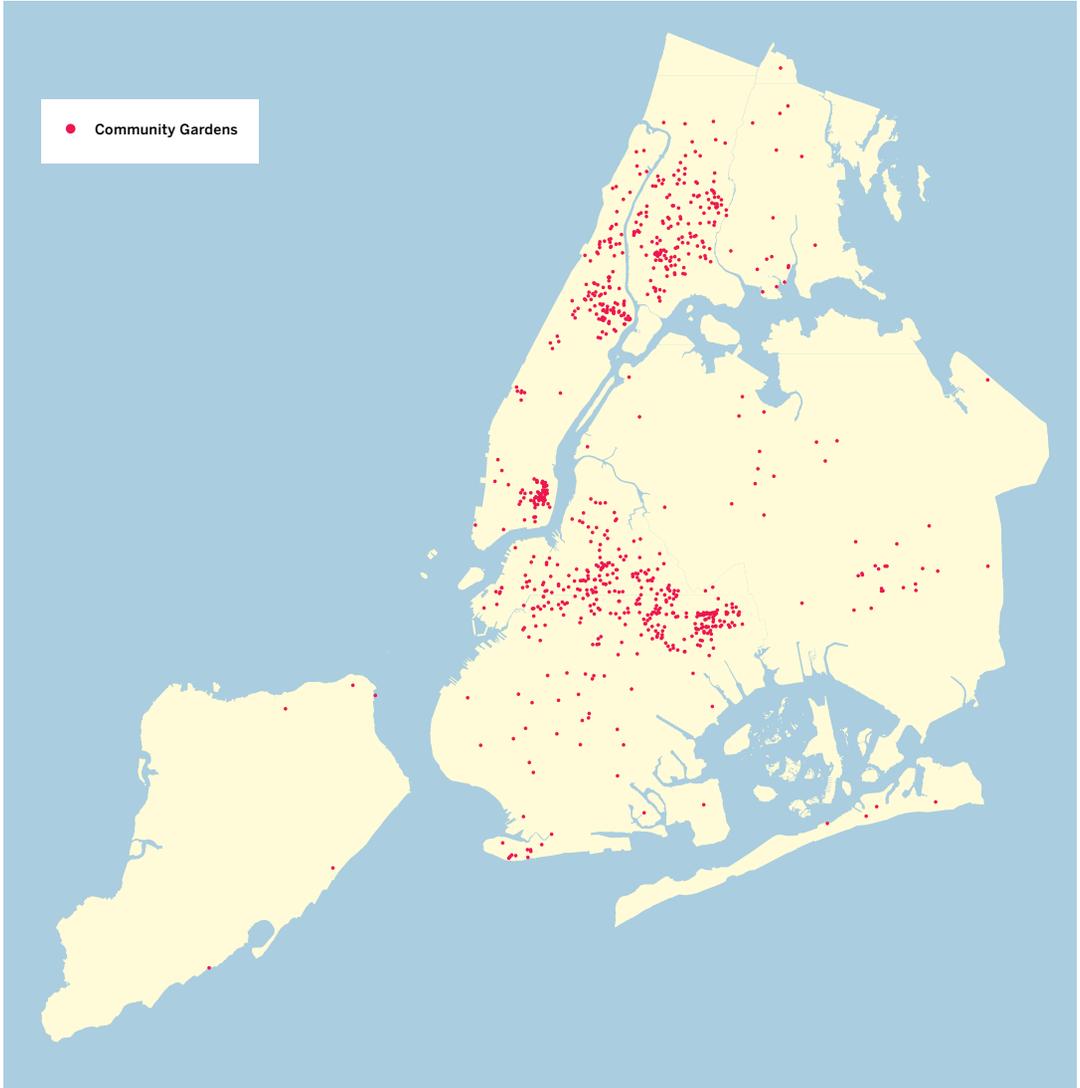
## **Community Management is Important**

The New York City Department of Parks and Recreation GreenThumb Program (GreenThumb) is the largest community gardening program in the country, serving over 8,000 registered garden members in more than 500 gardens citywide. As the program's director since 2001, I have become convinced that community gardening provides unique benefits to its participants that are distinct from the well documented health benefits provided by traditional parks. These benefits are directly linked with community gardening's ability to provide participants with the opportunities to be actively involved in decision-making about the use and development of the community garden space. As self-governed spaces which are continually changed and modified by their collaborative user groups, community gardens provide many opportunities for exploring novel environments and situations.

Unlike traditional municipal parks and community gardens in some other programs, gardens managed by GreenThumb are true community-managed spaces. New York may go farther than many other cities in its recognition of the rights of community volunteers to set the parameters

Youth in Clinton  
Community Garden,  
Hells Kitchen, NY.

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**Map of more than 500  
community gardens  
in New York City.**

DATA SOURCE: NYC DEPT OF PARKS  
AND RECREATION AND COUNCIL ON  
THE ENVIRONMENT OF NEW YORK CITY;  
MAP CREATED BY JARLATH O'NEIL-  
DUNNE, UNIVERSITY OF VERMONT



Gardeners protesting on the steps of NYC City Hall (2000).

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of garden management. This is in part a legacy of the political struggle to preserve the gardens in the late 1990s, when gardeners banded together citywide to challenge the mayoral administration's plans to develop or sell the properties. The resulting public outcry culminated in a lawsuit by the New York State Attorney General, which alleged the gardens' right to exist as de facto parkland. The settlement of this lawsuit in 2002 included specific language defining the rights of volunteer gardeners to play an active role in the determination of future plans for the use of garden spaces. This has led to a general acceptance on the part of the Parks administration that community garden groups have wide latitude in determining how their city-owned spaces will be designed, managed, and used.

The spirit of the New York City community gardening movement is also very much based in the activist agenda of the late 1970s and early 1980s when citizen actors decided to take matters into their own hands to reclaim their decaying neighborhoods. GreenThumb was established in 1978 as a means for the City to manage and assist the growing number of gardening groups that had taken over abandoned city property. From its conception, the program was designed to be demand-driven, to provide material resources, training, and legitimacy to citizen volunteer groups who chose to clean up their neighborhoods themselves rather than wait for municipal intervention (Von Hassel 2002).

Gardeners transformed  
dumping grounds and  
abandoned lots into  
thriving community spaces.

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DOME community  
garden on West 84th  
Street, Manhattan (1979).

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The general guidelines for the creation and operation of a GreenThumb community garden are outlined in a license document that is issued by the City of New York to the group of volunteers operating the garden. Beyond these guidelines (which focus primarily on public access and very general standards of maintenance aimed at preventing hazardous conditions), the governance and operation of the gardens is determined solely by the volunteers. As such, the gardens are managed for a variety of uses and functions as recreational, cultural, and educational spaces, as well as places for growing food and flowers.

During the last century, many gardening programs have been started in New York and other cities as part of top-down strategies to assist the poor. These programs, envisioned for numerous purposes including education for schoolchildren, job programs for the unemployed, or war gardens for providing produce during times of shortage, have seldom continued once the crisis they were created to address had passed (Lawson 2005). GreenThumb garden volunteers, however, have shown commitment to continuing to operate gardens over more than 30 years, and to organize politically against the City, when it indicated that the program would be discontinued (Stone 2000). Garden volunteers in New York clearly value their independence and the latitude they are given to govern their own licensed spaces.

Recognizing this independent spirit, I have deliberately taken a hands-off policy regarding the physical and organizational development of individual community gardens. As a civil servant I am committed to ensuring that the gardens, as public lands, provide a public benefit. I am not, however, convinced that anyone other than the garden volunteers themselves can determine which benefit is most needed in their communities. The numerous public programs envisioned, designed, and operated by garden volunteers are implemented with almost no input from GreenThumb staff. Most of the gardens we work with receive less than \$600 per year in material support. GreenThumb provides gardeners with access to basic materials necessary to the gardens functioning: access to water, soil, plants, and tools. By employing outreach staff to work with garden groups and organize workshops and events, GreenThumb also provides a human network, someone to call when you have a problem or want to connect with other gardeners.

This is important because the benefits provided by community gardening to the neighborhood — and particularly the benefits provided to the individuals running garden programs — depend, in part, on the gardeners' autonomy from the GreenThumb program. Limiting the material resources we provide creates challenges to the garden group that may ultimately strengthen both group dynamics and individuals' skills. As gardeners strive to find creative, low-cost and culturally appropriate ways to meet the community gardens' operational needs, they gain valuable problem-solving skills and create a network of contacts among garden-supporting individuals, businesses, and institutions in their neighborhoods. Volunteers asked to help maintain traditional parks or gardens operated by groups with paid maintenance staff have no need to develop these skills, and in my experience seldom do.

The success and long-term sustainability of community garden projects depends entirely on the vested interests of neighborhood-based grass-roots volunteers. Disinterest and vandalism are frequent outcomes of urban greening projects implemented without the degree of project buy-in created by giving gardeners broad decision-making latitude in designing and managing their spaces. Equally importantly, the benefits to the gardening individual and community derived from independent and creative decision-making are lacking in projects designed and maintained by neighborhood outsiders, particularly when they are institutional staff or organized, short-term volunteers.<sup>1</sup>

### **GreenThumb Garden Survey 2003**

To document the many benefits provided to local communities by GreenThumb garden volunteer groups, GreenThumb, in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service Northern Research Station, undertook a study of 324 community garden groups registered with the GreenThumb

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1. Several gardens built in New York in the 1990s by the Parks Council provide unfortunate examples of this problem. Although the not-for-profit organization attempted to link each garden site with an institution, such as a local school, neighborhood volunteers were not involved in the design or construction of the garden sites. Once the Parks Council staff was no longer present, the garden sites fell into disrepair when local grass roots volunteers showed little interest in using or maintaining them.

Program in 2003 (Svendsen and Stone 2003). GreenThumb staff collected data from garden groups using a standardized assessment. Garden volunteers were asked a series of questions about their use of and feelings about their spaces. The results provided valuable data about how the gardens were being managed and which uses and activities volunteers felt were important to cultivate. When asked what types of events were held in the garden in the last 2 years, groups responded to a list of options, illustrated in the chart (Fig. 2). The types of activities that volunteer GreenThumb gardeners choose to sponsor demonstrate both the needs of the urban communities in which they are located as well as unique and inventive ways to address these needs.

## Recreation

It seems obvious that community gardeners would report “recreation” as a top activity taking place in GreenThumb gardens. Community gardening may provide a uniquely beneficial type of recreation, however, because it is unstructured and contains more opportunity for creativity and novel experiences. Unlike traditional parks containing playground equipment or fields designed for organized sports, community gardens encourage creative play and risk-taking in an **unstructured, natural environment**. Leading play researchers believe that risk-taking is an inherent part of play and that we cannot remove all risk from play environments without seriously diminishing their benefit to users. Structured recreation, such as athletics, while beneficial in some regards, does not provide an essential creative element (Brown 1998).

→ SEE HEERWAGEN PAGE 38

Opportunities for rough and tumble play in a natural setting, something that suburban and rural dwellers may take for granted, are often unavailable in urban settings where open space is limited and fear of crime and other dangers cause parents to keep children indoors. A study of convicted murderers illustrated one of the more serious possible outcomes of limiting this type of play behavior — none of the men interviewed had engaged in normal roughhousing as youngsters. The researchers believe that unstructured play helps children understand limits, empathize with others, and determine boundaries (Brown 1998).

By providing safe spaces where children can interact with nature and come into contact with a diverse and multigenerational group of

1100 Bergen Street Garden in Brooklyn shows the site in its neighborhood context.

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Paradise Garden in the Bronx shows the use of the site as a recreation space and a cultural space.

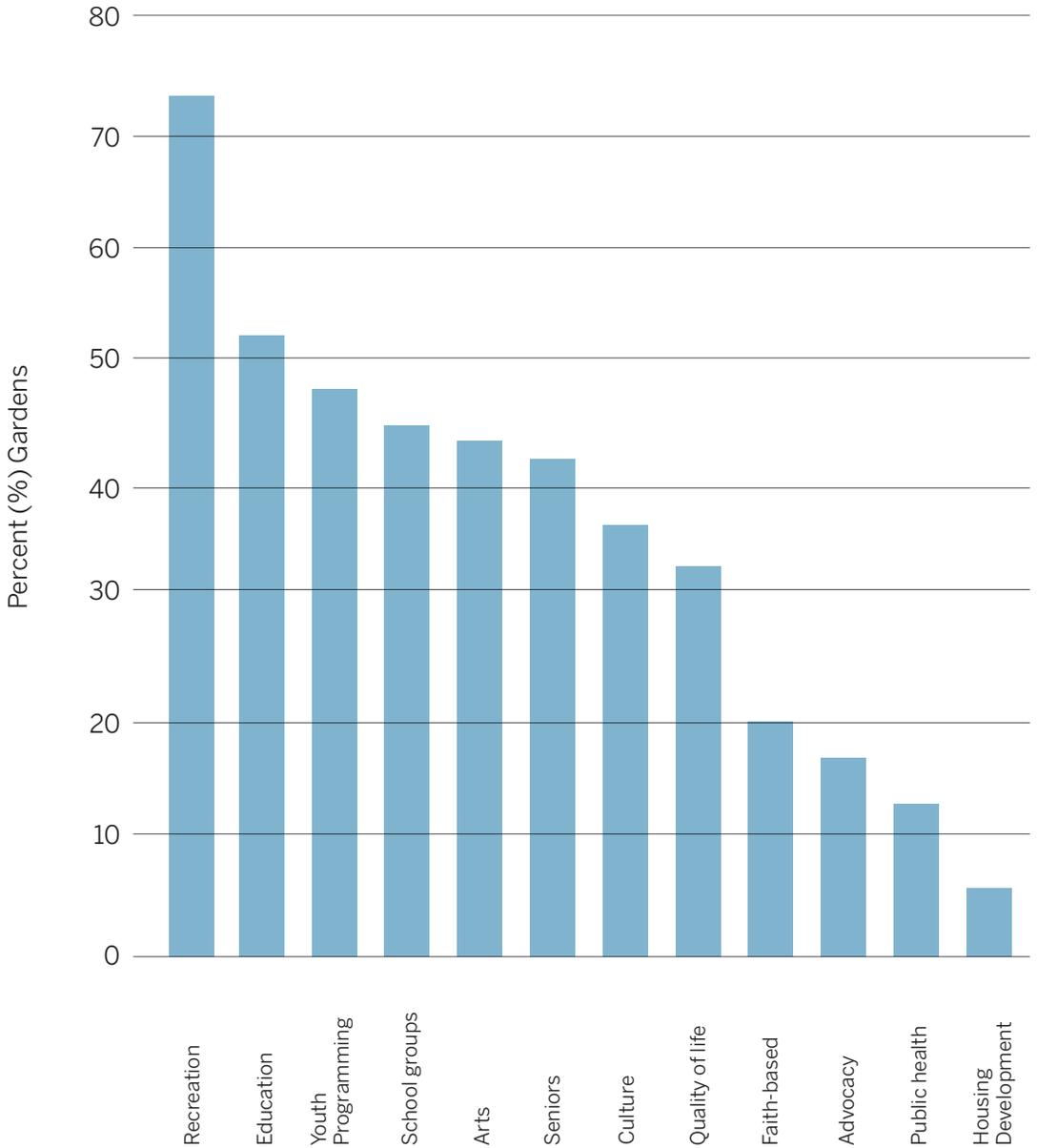
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SERVICE



*Figure 2***GARDEN EVENTS**

## Types of events held in community gardens

DATA SOURCE: GREENTHUMB GARDEN SURVEY (2003)



watchful adults, community gardens help provide one of the essential ingredients of a healthy childhood (Louv 2005). Community gardeners I have worked with, regardless of their exposure to academic research on the subject or individual level of education, seem to realize that bringing children into contact with nature is critically important to their development. Many community gardeners have designed their spaces intentionally to meet this recognized need by creating varied habitats for many species. GreenThumb gardens contain fish ponds and butterfly gardens, plantings for bird habitat and forage, as well as quiet seating areas ideal for observing the natural world, and open spaces for kids to run.

### Education

For community gardeners, the act of instructing visiting children and adults about the natural world, cultural traditions in agriculture, and gardening techniques also benefits the teacher by providing a sense of expertise and pride. This appears to lead to increased self-esteem and sense of identity for many community gardeners with whom I have worked. The fact that over 50 percent of garden groups reported holding educational activities as well as events for youth and school groups, demonstrates the important role that teaching plays in the lives of community garden volunteers. The fact that GreenThumb does not in any way instruct or require volunteer gardeners to provide educational events also indicates that engaging in teaching and learning is a satisfying pastime for many volunteers.

### Seniors

Research on New York City community gardens indicates that many of the volunteers providing these valuable educational lessons to their communities are **senior citizens** (Sokolovsky in press). This is borne out by my own observations. In addition, the 2003 garden survey found that 43 percent of gardening groups reported having events for seniors. Many seniors participate in gardening in New York City as a nostalgic reflection of an agricultural background in childhood as well as to fulfill a desire or economic necessity to grow fresh food. The overall population of community gardeners is also aging. Many New York City community gardens were founded in the early 1980s; as of 2003, 39

→ SEE BENNATON PAGE 232

percent of gardens were less than 10 years old, 36 percent of gardens were 11-20 years old, and 23 percent of gardens were 21-30 years old. Many, if not most, GreenThumb gardens are still being operated by the original founding volunteers who are now in their 60s and 70s.

Many gardeners in New York City hail from Puerto Rico or the American South where they were actively engaged in farming for their livelihood. Because of events such as the Great Migration, this demographic trend has been observed and documented in other large northeastern cities (Zeiderman 2006). Though their agricultural memories are not always positive, aging gardeners often express an interest in educating their city-raised neighbors about “what it was like.” A gardener in Brooklyn who routinely grew cotton in her community garden plot once told me, “I hate cotton—when I left South Carolina I never wanted to see cotton again, but then I thought about all these folks who never had to pick it, and I wanted them to see what we had to do.” Nostalgia for a rural past is also reflected in garden names like

**Gardener at Hull Street Garden in Brooklyn.**

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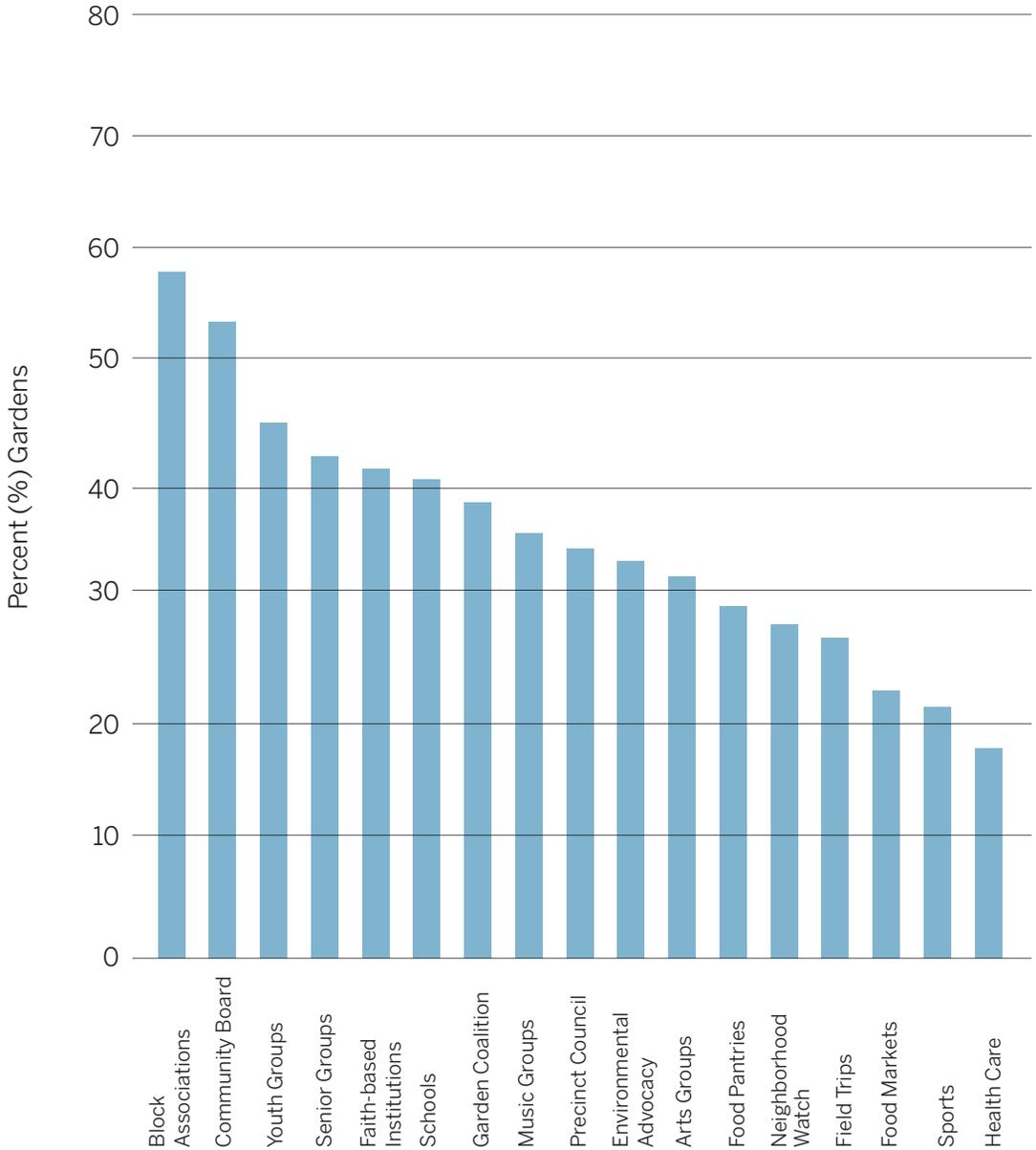


Figure 3

**COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES**

Community events in which garden groups participate

DATA SOURCE: GREENTHUMB GARDEN SURVEY (2003)



“Down Home Garden,” “God’s Little Green Acre,” and “El Flamboyan,” named after a favorite Puerto Rican flowering tree.

In a very real way, seniors who engage in community gardening are remaking a small part of the urban environment into a rural, agrarian society that better reflects their traditional values. Particularly for older adults, research has shown that social integration and the strength of social ties are important predictors of well-being and longevity (Kewon et al. 1998). I believe that participation in the creation and management of community gardens may be particularly beneficial in this regard, as it gives urban seniors a platform to demonstrate their cultural knowledge and history, and to act and be seen as “respected elders” in their communities. The importance of “culture” to community garden groups is illustrated in the 2003 survey results, with over 40 percent of groups reporting holding cultural events.

### Health and Social Benefits of Community-Managed Space

Individuals of all ages who are engaged in the creation and implementation of garden programs designed to help others are likely to benefit through the contribution such activities make to their sense of **identity and self-importance**. Many studies have reinforced the important role self-esteem and identity play in promoting health in individuals and communities (Thoits 1991). Participation in altruistic activities, in particular, has been cited as being especially beneficial to individuals by helping to reduce stress, alleviate pain, and improve mental health (Lucs 1998, Dunlin and Hill 2003).

→ SEE MARVY PAGE 202

Volunteer gardeners surveyed in 2003 also reported participation in community-improvement, political, and social activities not related to the garden space. (Fig. 3.) These responses illustrate that gardener volunteers feel empowered to take on additional challenges beyond their garden gates. While the garden survey does not prove causality, I believe it is the experience of having decision-making control over the garden space and the ability to make significant and visible changes there that gives garden volunteers the sense of empowerment they need to participate in leadership activities outside the garden.

By creating a space that has improved their neighborhood in a tangible, concrete way, volunteer gardeners are able to see a beneficial transformation for which they were largely responsible as individuals

and groups. The pride garden volunteers feel is evident in the stories they tell. Almost inevitably, a community gardener asked to tell the history of his or her garden begins with the Herculean effort to remove abandoned cars and mountains of rubble and trash. Often emphasizing that “no one helped them, not the police, not the city, no one” garden founders tell of evicting dangerous drug dealers and teaching ill-mannered street children to respect the plants. As community gardens evolved in response to the deplorable conditions in neighborhoods caused by the 1970s fiscal crisis, it is not surprising that **gardeners’ stories are similar**. I believe that this “transforming the dangerous abandoned space into a flourishing garden” story is archetypal; it is a metaphor for the personal transformation many gardeners felt while engaged in the creative process of building and maintaining community gardens.

→ SEE SVENDSEN PAGE 58

### Lessons for Practitioners

By respecting the experiences, cultural traditions and wisdom of volunteer community gardeners, municipal and nonprofit gardening programs will reap the most benefits for local communities. Organizations like GreenThumb enable and provide legitimacy to the instinctive desire and natural ability of neighborhood residents to improve their physical surroundings by providing a framework for community garden volunteer activity, a physical space to implement it, and minimal material support. GreenThumb provides gardeners with access to the basic materials necessary to the gardens’ functioning, and a human support network of outreach workers. By resisting the bureaucratic temptation to over-design community spaces or engage in regulatory micromanagement, support organizations also will increase the mental health and social cohesion benefits community gardening projects provide to individual residents and neighborhoods. Strengthening individuals and empowering local grassroots decision-makers allows community garden support organizations to best contribute to individual health, urban revitalization, and neighborhood cohesion.

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