



The Green Thumb Print

Green Thumb News and Topics of Interest to Community Gardeners in New York City

December 2002

The bulletin of Green Thumb, a program of City of New York Parks & Recreation

Bushwick Garden Grows a New Community Service

When Hernan Pagan, coordinator of the People's Garden at the corner of Broadway and Greene Ave in Bushwick, found out a homeless shelter was going to open across from the garden, he wasn't thrilled.

"Our neighborhood is mostly residential, and it already has every kind of social-service agency you can imagine," he says.

"The last thing we needed was another one. The whole time they were rehabbing the building, we thought it was going to be lofts ready for gentrification, and we were worried about that. Instead, it was a homeless shelter."

The Broadway House Shelter opened at 1245 Broadway in early spring 2002, and 165 women, 37 of whom are mentally ill and chemically addicted, moved in next door. "The shelter was not welcome in the neighborhood when it opened, and it's not welcome now, because it's a residential area," Pagan says. "But we opened up the garden gates to the women, despite opposition from the neighborhood, which condemned me for doing it, because these women are in the greatest need. Most of us are a paycheck away from being homeless ourselves.

"Other GreenThumb gardeners who are in a similar situation have to keep in mind that opening the garden to a needy, downtrodden group of people is an act of love, tolerance, and compassion - and if a gardener doesn't have compassion, something is definitely wrong."

Shelter resident Deborah Samuel says, "We can get away from the stress of the shelter in the garden. We relax, BBQ, and play games."

The Broadway House is run by the Church Avenue Merchants Block Association, Inc., known as CAMBA, a not-for-profit organization based in Flatbush, Brooklyn. The shelter is funded by the New York City Department of Homeless services, and its goal is to "provide temporary emergency housing in a safe, supportive environment with programs designed to enable the women to improve their skill at securing long-term permanent housing and becoming self-sufficient.



People's Garden coordinator Hernan Pagan (second from the right) with shelter residents (from left to right): Sylvia Echeverri, Annie Thomas, Michael Carinci, and Deborah Samuel.

It serves both short- and long-term populations, who will require additional support, assistance and motivation to achieve independent living. "Through case management and referral, we provide activities such as mental health, substance abuse [sic], an onsite medical clinic, employment, assistance in developing independent living plans, applying for benefits or entitlements and completing housing applications. The ultimate goal is to help them move to program shelters or permanent housing and establish linkages with housing options in the community," according to a description of the shelter on CAMBA's website.

CAMBA is supported by grants and contracts from City, State, and the Federal government, as well as foundations, corporate entities, and individuals.

Pagan says, "The term 'homeless shelter' is very misleading. It's a drop-off area for people with mental illness, criminal behavior and drug addiction - supervised drugs, mostly. It's a mad house. It's a violent place to be, so much so that sometimes it's safer on the street."

Opening the garden to the homeless was "the hardest thing I have ever done," Pagan says.

continued on next page...

...continued from previous page

"But I honestly believe if it had not been for the type of respectful environment at the garden, the neighborhood would have been in a lot of trouble. Some of the younger people were getting violent with the women, throwing rocks. We have diffused 75-80% of the aggression through working together at the garden."

He said the biggest problems at the beginning were the violence and friction that existed between the community and the women, and the maintenance of the garden.

Pagan immediately faced the maintenance problem. "The women were very sloppy, and, as you can expect, they were not respectful to the community," Pagan says. There was all kind of garbage, sexual acts, etc. in the garden, but they don't do that now. There are emotionally disturbed women. They would get angry at me when I got ready to close at 9pm, saying I 'had no right' to close the garden, because it was a public place." When the days started to shorten, Pagan changed the open hours to be 10am-5pm, so the garden was closed before dark.

To increase respect for the garden, Pagan told the women individually that they would not be allowed in the garden if they didn't keep up with their trash.

He had copies of the garden rules printed up and posted in the garden and in the shelter. It also helped that one of the shelter staff started using the garden for an arts program.

Resident Jasmine Melendez says, "The staff wants us to respect the garden - all we hear is to clean it up, use ashtrays, and respect it."

Shelter residents started to help with the maintenance. "I selected two of the most hard-working and determined women, and gave them keys, and they started opening the garden from 10am-9pm, 7 days a week."

Reducing friction with the community has been the next challenge. "I personally spoke with the young people in the neighborhood," Pagan says, "and explained to them that the women were not to blame, that they are victims and not culprits. I had a program where I introduced youth, who were the most aggressive ones, and had them cook out with the women. Since the garden had a good reputation with the youth, I was able to re-direct and channel their aggression, and now there is very little confrontation. Today there's a lot of--well, not respect, but tolerance."

Jasmine Melendez says, "Without the garden to come together in, there would be a lot of yelling and aggravation because the neighborhood didn't want the shelter."

Michael Carinci, a resident of the Ward's Island Shelter who comes to visit his wife at the Broadway



Residents of an unwanted shelter are welcome at People's Garden in Bushwick where they feel like a part of the community.

House, says, "The garden brings everyone together. It's is part of our lives now. We don't have a home to go to and lock the door, like the shelter staff. This garden is all we have."

Another difficulty at the garden has been the transfer of women to other shelters. "Because women in the shelter system can be transferred without notice, I have lost some of the best gardeners, especially Sandy Dougherty and Sharon," Pagan says. "It's hard to build a sustainable program, because most of them need guidance and after they get trained in gardening skills, they are transferred. I hope there will be a good group of women there to start up again next summer."

Over the past summer, Pagan helped the women organize and clean up an abandoned GreenThumb garden a couple blocks away on Greene Avenue. Women from the shelter, working with a couple of young women who recently moved to the neighborhood, care for it. The garden, now called The Garden of Angels, is owned by the Trust for Public Land, as is the People's Garden. "We'd like to revitalize even more green spaces in the neighborhood next year," Pagan says.

Pagan has also had to deal with challenges from within the "old" garden organization. "After I opened the garden to the women, a lot of the regular people who used to come to the garden quit coming, and began to criticize me. My approval rating in the neighborhood went way down," Pagan says.

"Hernan is a great guy," Annie Thomas says. "He listens, and his personality is incredibly sympathetic."

"These women are survivors," Pagan says. "It hasn't been easy, but we've never looked back."

Easy to Compost, Easy to Green

What is COMPOSTING anyway?

"Compost is more than a fertilizer, more than a soil conditioner. It is a symbol of continuing life. Nature has been making compost since the first appearance of primitive life on this planet, eons before humans first walked the earth. Leaves falling to the forest floor are soon composted, returning their nutrients to the trees that bore them. The dead grass of the meadow, seared by winter's frost, is made compost in the dampness of the earth beneath. The greenness of the earth itself is strong testimony to nature's continuing composting program. The compost heap in your garden is an intentional replication of the natural process of birth and death that occurs almost everywhere in nature." (Excerpted from The Rodale Book of Composting). In short, Compost is organic material broken down to form humus that is added to your soil to improve its texture and enhance plant growth and production. It's easy, it's natural and all it takes is some green material (lettuce, carrot tops, shrub prunings), brown material (dried leaves), air, water and a pile at least 3 x 3 x 3 feet.

Composting in New York City

As many of you know the Compost Projects at the New York Botanical Garden, Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Queens Botanical Garden and Staten Island Botanical Garden all lost their funding in recent budget cuts. It is now more important than ever for community and school gardening programs to compost all of their organic waste on-site. By composting all the leaves, twigs and plant material in a garden you will create a rich resource for improving your soil and plant growth. By reducing the amount of bagged waste going out of the garden you will help reduce the enormous costs the city incurs from landfilling, hauling garbage long distances and also reduce the health related problems caused by diesel garbage trucks roaming our neighborhoods.

Need Compost?

GreenThumb will continue to strive to meet your garden's compost needs through on-site compost deliveries during the upcoming 2003 season. In the past GT has strongly encouraged gardens to compost. GT now requires your garden to compost on-site in order to receive compost or topsoil. GT recognizes the important role community and school gardens play in creating sustainable earth friendly societies. Hauling

away organic materials from GT gardens to be dumped into far away landfills while organic material from far away places is hauled and dumped in community gardens just doesn't make sense!

Want to learn how to compost or improve your composting project?

GreenThumb will offer basic compost instruction in English and Spanish at the annual GT GrowTogether Conference in March 2003 and additional workshops in the Bronx, Manhattan and Brooklyn later in the spring. Compost literature is available in your GreenThumb Garden Handbook, the GT office and at the Compost Demonstration Sites at the botanical gardens in the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens and Staten Island.

Share your Compost Wisdom with other gardens

GreenThumb would like to help community and school gardens share their composting success with other gardens. Write up a description of your compost project and we will try publish it in the GreenThumb Print to share with the gardening community. If you would be willing to help teach compost workshops to other gardeners, contact Susan Fields, Manhattan Outreach Coordinator 212-788-7078.

Sign Up!

You can now request open hour and other signs for your GreenThumb garden online. Go to www.GreenThumbnyc.org and click on the SIGNS icon. Print and send your completed form to Danny Burgos, Sign Coordinator or fax it to us at (212) 788-8052.

GreenThumb wishes you are yours a

Happy New Year!

We look forward to maintaining beautiful community gardens with you in 2003!