

OUTREACH PROGRAMS FOR BOTANIC GARDENS

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ABSTRACT

Two case studies of community gardens in ethnically diverse New York City neighborhoods demonstrate the possibilities for hands on learning by local residents concerning matters of ecology, horticulture and conservation which affect their own neighborhoods. Participants will discuss the needs of their communities and develop a plan that will work for their own particular community.

RESUMEN

Dos casos estudiados de jardines comunitarios en barrios con diversidad étnica en la ciudad de Nueva York demuestran las posibilidades de los residentes locales para aprender y practicar materias de ecología, horticultura y conservación que afecten a sus propios barrios. Los participantes discutirán las necesidades de sus comunidades y el desarrollo de un plan que acometerán para cada comunidad en particular.

INTRODUCTION

When you love the land, that love can extend from wide-open country spaces to small window boxes in heavily urbanized areas. Most of us live in or near cities as we approach the end of the 20th century and more of us move to urban areas every day. For a closeness with nature, city dwellers are

dependent upon islands of green... of all types:

- a private home with a lawn and a place for a garden, a tree or two for shade--a place we would consider ourselves lucky to live in or even to see from our window;
- house plants scattered about our

homes;

- municipal park land--from the well-maintained showcase parks of a city to the forgotten neighborhood corner "playgrounds" in poor neighborhoods;
- a botanical garden--usually only one per city;
- an apartment building guarded in front by a lone tree, branches reaching for sunlight and roots grasping for water and nutrients in soil hidden from view by concrete; its green company?--only some tufts of grass growing between sections of sidewalk;
- a vacant lot with weeds eking out an existence in the midst of thrown-away hulks of automobiles, broken appliances, and garbage of all sorts, with barren earth soaked by discarded chemicals offering a habitat shunned even by the most indiscriminating weeds.

This last "island of green", the abandoned lot, is the focus of two New York City programs: Bronx Green-Up, the outreach program of The New York Botanical Garden; and Brooklyn Green-Bridge, the outreach program of the Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

How do people turn a vacant lot containing the ugly discards of urban life into a garden with all the peace and nurturing of nature? How do urban folk get some of the benefits of living close

to the land even in the midst of an overwhelming concentration of concrete and the pervasive urban problems of crime, excessive noise, litter, poverty, and despair? The problem is really no less daunting than this. The process is no less than a reaffirmation of humankind's connection to the earth.

New York City is heavily urbanized and densely populated--the term "concrete jungle" was popularly coined with New York in mind. The prototype of the urban area which is in need of green, New York, none-the-less, was blessed many years ago with the designation of huge tracts of land as parkland. However, for the poor--or even the working and middle class--transportation to such areas is not always easy and, even if possible, does not affect their daily life. A community garden down the block or across the street, however, is a 365 day a year event, 365 days of benefits.

IMPORTANCE OF OUTREACH FOR BOTANIC GARDENS

Both the Brooklyn Botanic Garden and The New York Botanical Garden have developed an outreach program to assist in creating community gardens. The importance of such programs cannot be overestimated. Such programs counter the perception of botanic gardens as elitist, with a history of exclusion. As recipients of public funding, it is especially important that bota-

nic gardens not be entrenched against the surrounding communities, but rather accept a responsibility to the community and seek to build their audience from the community.

APPROPRIATE OUTREACH PROGRAMS

Creating community gardens is one aspect of an outreach program. Education is another important goal: going out to schools, e.g., with a "science suitcase," or bringing people into the garden for educational programs. The subject areas of horticulture, botany and environmental science are all relevant subjects. Listen to the vocalized needs from community groups and from individuals. Tailor your programs accordingly. In multi-ethnic and multi-cultural cities such as New York City, outreach programs need to be relevant to different ethnic groups. Listening is the key; preconceptions are the danger. One community garden or program need not be like another to be successful.

Of great importance in any outreach program is the effective use of volunteers, most notably volunteers from the community who are interested in creating a community garden or working with a school or church garden. Botanical garden staff cannot do the effective networking that someone who lives in the community can. Yet, volunteers will need help and guidance--this may be the first garden they've helped create or

the first time they've worked with a group of neighbors.

EFFECTIVE OUTREACH

Needs assessment. If a botanical garden has never had an outreach program before, the first step is to assess interest and need by surveying other community organizations and individuals (e.g., visitors to the botanic garden). Pay attention to the demographics of the communities involved and try to formulate a balanced approach to include all groups of people.

Selling your administration. Ascertain the interest of garden staff in an outreach program. Present the needs of the community and a plan of action for beginning an outreach program.

Getting influential people involved and committed. It is important to gain support from politicians and community leaders. You can then utilize such support in selling your program to the administration of the garden, in getting funding for your program, and in publicizing the program to interested community groups and individuals (whose interest will in turn gain support from other politicians, administration and potential funders).

Funding. All possible sources of funding should be pursued: public money; foundations; corporations; individuals, through parties and dinners; and events which attract the press and pos-

sibly result in news stories—which in turn can be used to sell the program to funders. Speaking at events is constantly important.

Program: Using Botanical Garden Resources. After assessing needs, start... but start small. Build upon small successes. One successful garden can spawn many more. The first community garden which Bronx Green-Up assisted in was so inspiring to the community that four other gardens—of different types, quality and degrees of success—were started within one or two blocks of the first garden.

The Brooklyn Botanic Garden found a logical starting point for "Brooklyn GreenBridge" in working with school/ community gardens, building on a long-standing relationship between the Garden and New York City schools. Nearby schools and schools in targeted communities were selected for the first year of programs.

Staff also will be learning. You will need to develop a criteria as to how and who you will help in your outreach program, how much staff will do, what your resources are, etc. For instance, if you have a truck, you can assist community gardeners in picking up supplies; if you have a staff horticulturist with good speaking skills, you can give workshops.

Its important to be realistic about how much time you have. You need to decide how much follow-up you can

handle. A planting demonstration may be reasonable, but the actual planting should probably be the responsibility of the community gardeners. Without community involvement, the garden will not succeed. Encouraging that involvement, even at the risk of failure, may be more important than actually doing the work. Bronx Green-Up has assisted in over 170 projects. Watering and planting chores would quickly fatigue the staff of four!

EVALUATION

The continuation of an outreach program is dependent on appropriate evaluation. Because of the nature of gardening—vacant lot, window boxes, roof top gardens—aneecdotal evidence can be compelling. If a community garden helped residents feel safer because drug dealers were no longer using the lot to sell drugs... that is a powerful message!

Of course quantifying information is always important. You can keep track of who you helped, what you did, what plants were distributed, workshops given, etc. The more numbers you can generate, the more you can compare one year to the next and more specific you can be with garden administration, politicians, and funders.

Creating a newsletter is a valuable tool. A newsletter can be a forum of recognition for individuals and communities who have created something spe-

cial and an inspiration for those who are trying. It can help you step back from the day-to-day running of the program, and get a broader perspective of what you have done and are doing. It is a history of your efforts and has multiple uses in validating your efforts to those whose support you need.

WORKSHOP

At the II International Congress on Education, held in May of 1993 in the Canary Islands, Terry Keller, Director of Bronx Green-Up, The New York Botanical Garden and Lucy Jones, Vice-President, Education and Information Services, the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, presented a workshop which walked participants through these areas of concern. Mental practice of the steps you will take, writing down your plan, assessing your resources, anticipating problems, is essential when starting a new program. Such practical workshop experience allowed participants to visualize the "lay of the land", or what they will need to do when they return to their respective communities and botanic gardens.

CONCLUSION

Bringing areas of green to our cities where there currently are none can elicit all sorts of heartwarming emotions. The steps to turning such

"thoughts" to reality is, however, nitty gritty. The practical steps outlined in this paper need to be followed. Vigilance is constantly necessary. City gardens, community gardens, do not "take care of themselves". They will fail unless there is one or two very committed persons in the community and an outside resource to facilitate the negotiation of all the obstacles inherent in creating and maintaining an urban community garden.

Botanical gardens will provide a valuable service if they assist in creating green spaces in the communities beyond their gates. In return, they will gain a greener, more beautiful urban area of which the botanical garden can be the jewel. They will build a community of knowledgeable visitors who will aspire to visit botanical gardens as their appreciation of plants and nature grows along with the vegetables, flowers, and trees in the community gardens they tend. Perhaps most importantly, children will not have to grow up without knowing a tree, without smelling a flower... without all the treasures of a garden outside their door.

Comparatively few people will ever see the tropical rain forests and the other beautiful wilderness areas of the earth; everyone will see the green--or the garbage--outside of their homes. What could be more meaningful than greening our cities?