

Case Studies of Community Gardens and Urban Agriculture:

Philadelphia

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Community gardening in Philadelphia has a long history that has been traced back to the Vacant Lots Cultivation Association (1897-1927). During the middle decades of the twentieth century there were various school gardens, war gardens, and victory gardens. After the 1950s, the city of Philadelphia underwent a long process of deindustrialization, depopulation, and de-urbanization, which left tens of thousands of vacant lots and abandoned buildings amid deteriorating neighborhoods. Those conditions set the stage for a revitalization of community gardening in the 1970s.¹

The main organizational force behind the late twentieth-century wave of community gardening in Philadelphia has been the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society (PHS). To understand better the work of that organization, I interviewed its executive vice-president, J. Blaine Bonham, Jr., who has worked at the nonprofit organization for thirty-one years. He was hired to launch the Philadelphia Green program in 1974 and was a founding member of the Neighborhood Gardens Association/A Philadelphia Land Trust, an organization that has helped secure the land tenure for some of the community gardens. He is also the coauthor of *Old Cities/Green Cities: Communities Transform Unmanaged Land*.²

Founded in 1827, the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society has historically been dedicated to the art and science of horticulture and its exhibition. The organization is known especially for the Philadelphia Flower Show, which began in 1829 and today is the largest indoor flower shows worldwide. During the 1970s the organization responded

to the declining fortunes of Philadelphia's neighborhoods and its residents by expanding its activities to help create community gardens. This early work developed into the program now known as Philadelphia Green, which focuses broadly on urban greening and revitalization. Initially funded by proceeds from the Philadelphia Flower Show, in addition the program currently secures additional funding from grants from foundations, contracts from the city government's federal block grant and its Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, landscape architecture services for the management of public landscapes, and the society's general fundraising efforts.

Although Philadelphia Green originally focused on community gardening, its work soon diversified into other forms of urban greening and horticultural development. As Mr. Bonham explained, "It was originally a community vegetable program for low-income neighborhoods to grow food on vacant land. Over the decade or so after that, PHS was able to get foundation funding, and Philadelphia was also the first city to use federal block grant funds for this kind of work. With that funding, we expanded our work, to respond to requests from residents to plant trees and create small sitting gardens. People like to grow food, but they also garden for the sense of community and for the positive impact on the environment. It's very empowering to take a vacant, trashed lot and making it into a beautiful place. The land can be a place to grow food or to have barbecues and sit under your favorite trees. That aspect of community improvement quickly rose to the top as one of the chief motivators. Improving communities in general became the modus operandi for our community work."

In 1985 Philadelphia Green underwent another expansion of its programming when it decided to develop greening projects to improve public spaces. Another example is the Parks Revitalization Project, which began in the early 1990s and involves collaboration among Philadelphia Green, volunteer "Friends" organizations in neighborhoods, the city's Department of Recreation, and the Fairmount Park Commission (the city's equivalent to a parks department). The city had been unable to maintain all of its park and recreation sites, but after Philadelphia Green helped organize the neighborhood-based associations, many of the sites were restored. The city remained responsible for the overall maintenance of parks, and the neighborhood groups helped by raising money to plant trees, setting up gardens within the parks, and organizing people

for occasional clean-ups. As Bonham noted, “It worked beautifully, and now we have about over 60 parks in the program.” Since the 1990s, Philadelphia Green has continually expanded its greening programs to include improving streetscapes, developing pocket gardens, landscaping prominent public sites, greening high-profile street corridors, linking storm-water management with open space utilization, and managing vacant lands. In 2001 Philadelphia Green articulated its many urban greening projects into a comprehensive “Green City Strategy,” a plan for urban revitalization that was based on urban greening and included community gardening as one of the means to that end. In 2003 the city of Philadelphia adopted the strategy as part of its Neighborhood Transformation Initiative, which will be discussed in more detail below.³

Two other key organizations have played an important role in the success of community gardens in the city. From 1977 through 2004, the Urban Gardening Program of the Pennsylvania State Cooperative Extension in Philadelphia County has assisted community gardeners by training youth, providing classes to enable residents to become master gardeners, and helping groups start and improve community gardens. In 1986 a new organization was formed—Neighborhood Gardens Association, a Philadelphia Land Trust—in order to acquire properties with land tenure risk. Although it is estimated that Philadelphia is home to over 40,000 vacant buildings and abandoned lots, some of the community gardens faced closure due to development pressure. As of 2005 the organization held title to about two dozen gardens in the city, including community vegetable gardens, sitting parks and flower gardens.⁴

A survey by the American Community Garden Association in 1996 found that Philadelphia was home to about 1135 community gardens, giving the city the distinction of having one of the highest levels of community gardening in the U.S., both in terms of the absolute number of gardens and gardens per capita.⁵ However, Bonham notes that Philadelphia Green completed a survey a few years ago, and they estimated that the total number of vibrant gardens was a much more modest figure of about 500. He noted that some of the gardens had been built on; for others, neighborhoods declined significantly, or coordinators moved or became too old to manage the site. Based on their experience with the collapse of some community gardens, both Philadelphia Green and the Neighborhood Gardens Association have been strategic in their selection of gardens to

support. As Bonham explained, “The Neighborhood Gardens Association has focused on the very large gardens, which I think is a good approach from the perspective of resources. If you have to choose which to acquire, it makes sense to choose the large ones, because they have an inherent stability that makes their longevity more assured. I think that one of the reasons Philadelphia has had so many small gardens is because of the row-house configuration. If you take one or two row houses down, you’ll have the possibility of a garden, but it’s a relatively small site. It might be thirty-feet wide by fifty or seventy-feet deep. The longevity of that kind of garden is questionable, unless it’s a really strong block that is well organized and committed to the garden.”

Bonham added that Philadelphia Green also has a special focus on these larger gardens: “We’ve identified about ten larger gardens that have been around for a number of years. Most of them have fairly established governance; and some have infrastructure, such as sheds, watering systems, and greenhouses, or they involve schools. We helped to organize the leaders of those gardens. We call them ‘keystone gardens’ because they are the keystones to the neighborhoods, just as Pennsylvania is the Keystone State. We take people to visit them, and they attract gardeners from more than the surrounding neighborhood. We’ve focused on them for preservation and for infrastructure development, because we think they’ll be permanent assets to those neighborhoods. We have developed a Garden Tenders program, a multi-session training course, for would-be community gardeners. We then work further with those ‘graduates’ showing the most potential to make gardens.”

Equity and Sustainability

As more and more houses were demolished in the 1990s, the amount of vacant land appearing in neighborhoods began to overwhelm the valiant efforts of volunteer community gardeners. In 1995, PHS partnered with the New Kensington Community Development Corporation on a seven-year project to address the vacant lot issue in the Kensington-Fishtown neighborhood, which had over 1,100 vacant lots. The project resulted in fifteen new community gardens, several hundred “cleaned and greened”

vacant lots, and over 500 new trees. A study funded by the William Penn Foundation and completed by University of Pennsylvania Wharton School's Susan Wachter indicated that the vacant lot stabilization project improved housing values in New Kensington by as much as 30%. As Bonham noted, "That was an important analysis. Once we translated the improvements into economic terms, it gave greening a new credibility."⁶

A second major effort to assist low-income neighborhoods has occurred through the city's Neighborhood Transformation Initiative. In 2003 and 2004 the city developed contracts with PHS, which was charged with helping to develop programs to clean up and maintain vacant lots, to develop general greening programs in targeted neighborhoods, and to assist in citywide greening for streets, parks, new community gardens, and commercial corridors. In one of the programs, the Community-Based Vacant Lot Program, Philadelphia Green works with neighborhood organizations and community development corporations (including the New Kensington CDC) to improve and maintain land in the neighborhoods. The organizations provide jobs for low-income residents in the neighborhoods, and some organizations also provide job training.⁷

As Bonham explained, "We've persuaded the city that volunteers from the city's neighborhoods are not going to accept maintenance responsibility for 40,000 vacant lots. That is the work of a municipality. After the lot is stabilized and, volunteers can then develop it further as a green space if they want to make community gardens, small parks, a playing field, or simply put a bed of flowers on the corner of a greened lot. However, all this green land has to be maintained. Initially, the city thought that the Streets Department could maintain it. It quickly became obvious that the city's Streets Department didn't have the capacity to maintain them in addition to its normal workload. So the city provides us funds to contract with currently nine community groups, some of them CDCs, who in turn have hired community residents and formed teams. We help them with capital such as lawn mowers and weed whackers, and we train them in basic landscape maintenance skills. A few of the organizations, such as Ready, Willing and Able, also teach the workers basic job skills, such as showing up on time and having a work schedule. Many of the people hired have histories of homelessness and drug related addiction problems or and they are mostly men. When you talk to these men, it's

heartening to understand what it means to them to have a job and to do something that is valuable to the community.”

Given the large number of vacant lots, it is impossible to green all of them, and as of mid-2005 Philadelphia Green and the partner organizations were maintaining about 500 improved and 2,000 unimproved vacant lots. As Bonham explained, “We’ve tried to be strategic about this. We work with the community to identify the lots. Often they are entryways to the community or on main thoroughfares. We choose lots that will change the perception of the community not only by the people driving through but also the people who live in the neighborhoods.”⁸

In addition to the work of Philadelphia Green, two other developments that link equity and sustainability are worth mentioning. The food security organization Philabundance has helped run a community garden that provides food to the hungry, and the organization’s “Share the Harvest” program collects produce from gardeners for distribution through the food bank and pantry network. Philadelphia is also home to entrepreneurial urban agriculture, some of which has provided training to low-income residents and high school students. Examples of the projects are Greensgrow Farm and the Roots Gardening Project (a high school rooftop greenhouse).⁹

Policy Issues and Recommendations

Even if one adopts a conservative figure of 500 community gardens in the city, Philadelphia has about one community garden for every 3,000 residents or 750 households, a figure that is among the highest in the country. The high level of community gardens is due in part to the huge number of vacant lots in the city and high level of urban poverty. Philadelphia also has a strong tradition of gardening and horticulture, enhanced by the first modern community gardening leaders from the 1970s and 1980s, many who had grown up in the South on farms. Community gardeners in Philadelphia have been fortunate to receive the support from PHS’s Philadelphia Green, the Penn State Urban Gardening Program, the Neighborhood Gardens Association, as well as block grants through the city government.

Philadelphia Green provides a well-developed model of how a nonprofit organization’s support for community gardening can be embedded in a much broader

vision of urban greening and revitalization. There is a strong, ongoing, and developing partnership with the city government that embeds community gardening in a broader program of nonprofit-government partnerships. Bonham noted that in addition to the mayor's office, the city's Recreation Department, Streets Department, and Water Department have all been partners and supportive of various Philadelphia Green projects. (Philadelphia does not have a Neighborhood Department equivalent to those in Seattle and Cleveland, and instead the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative has been run directly out of the Mayor's office.) Of course, the city government's support could change with a different mayoral administration, but city leadership is trying to institutionalize the community greening initiatives currently in effect.

As discussed above, one of the key programs of the Neighborhood Transformation Initiative has been vacant lot reclamation to "clean and green" lots in targeted neighborhoods, and the city's investment has been significant. As Bonham explained, "To date, with this year's contract in place, the city has spent over \$9 million on vacant land reclamation and maintenance. However, maintenance is a continually growing cost, because the more we clean up, the more there is to maintain." Although the city has stepped up to the challenge of vacant land management, after the first year it has not been able to dedicate Neighborhood Transformation Initiative funds specifically for community gardens. As Bonham explained, "Personally, I can understand that logic. The problem of the vacant land is so enormous that the city has said that if we want to help create community gardens, we need to raise money from other non-government sources." However, Bonham added that in his experience funders today are not especially interested in community gardens; instead, they want to see proposals for "the next big step in community development through greening."

Once vacant lots are cleaned and greened, they become possible sites for community gardens, provided that there is significant interest from the neighborhood. However, the use of the land for gardening, recreation, or other community activities is not guaranteed over the long term. Although Philadelphia has not seen the high levels of real estate appreciation characteristic of the Bay Area, Seattle, and Boston, redevelopment and gentrification are occurring in several neighborhoods. The city's many vacant lots, including the ones that have been cleaned and greened, eventually

could be resold to developers. As a result, they are in a holding status similar to the land banks of other cities. This issue raises the question of balancing development with green space maintenance, that is, a question of urban planning.

As Bonham explained, “In 1999 we did a cost-benefit analysis on the issue of vacant land maintenance, and part of the recommendation was to set up a land bank like the one in Cleveland. Instead of creating a separate agency, the City has condemned and acquired probably over 6,000 lots and to put them into its Redevelopment Authority for future disposition. The city realized that if the land was ever going to be repackaged for redevelopment, it had to take control of the land. No one is pretending that every piece of land should be a green space; that would fragment the city. However, as we re-plan the city, we need permanent green spaces in those communities. That’s the challenge we’re facing.”¹⁰

Unlike Seattle, where there is a city plan that explicitly has a per capita ratio of community gardens as part of its green space targets, Philadelphia does not have a city plan, let alone a city-wide goal for community gardens. As Bonham explained, “The city’s growth had stagnated for so long that planning for the future became anathema in the city leadership’s thinking. Today a boom real estate market around Center City and its fringe communities is spurring development, without overarching redevelopment plan in place, and many community gardens that were on unvalued property have become hot properties. The city just got funding to develop an open space plan, and included as part of the team. I would like to see a plan that articulates has a certain percentage of land dedicated to open space, greenways, and community gardens. It doesn’t mean that every community garden should continue to exist, because sometimes gardens are on large lots that are most appropriate for development. It’s a challenging situation, but I think that for Philadelphia there is recognition on a civic level of how important this is.”

If the situation were to develop so that vacant lots were to disappear, community gardening would need to transition to public land and land held in trust, as has occurred in cities with high levels of gentrification. Fortunately, the city’s Fairmount Park Commission has been open to the idea of community gardens in city parks, so as land values increase, there is potential to expand onto public green spaces. However, as

Bonham explained, “At this point there’s so much vacant land that it’s just not needed. That’s just part of the dynamics of Philadelphia in the early twenty-first century.”

Based on an interview by David Hess with J. Blaine Bonham, Jr., on August 17, 2005.

Web site: <http://www.pennsylvaniahorticulturalsociety.org>

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