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## Nature et Jardins botaniques au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle

Genève — 2-4 juin 1993

# Community outreach: working with the underserved and disadvantaged through horticulture

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## ABSTRACT

KELLER, T. (1993). Community outreach: working with the underserved and disadvantaged through horticulture.

Comptes-rendus du colloque "Nature et Jardins botaniques au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle", Genève, 2-4 juin 1993.  
*Boissiera* 47: 00-00.

This general presentation will describe Bronx Green-Up, the outreach program of The New York Botanical Garden and its positive effect on ethnically diverse, underserved and disadvantaged communities in The Bronx. Initially established in 1988, this program fulfills a part of The New York Botanical Garden's mission statement 'To play a responsible part in our community'.

Bronx Green-up works with community groups who are reclaiming city owned lots in their neighbourhoods, lots which, abandoned, have been used as dumping grounds. The focus of these projects is to turn these spaces into community managed gardens and parks. In the process, these green spaces become valued community assets and centers of activity.

The Bronx Green-Up program provides on-site educational, technical and material assistance in various forms, working in conjunction with schools, day care centers, senior citizen housing, social service agencies and other community based groups. Part of the program includes creating vital workshops and projects, teaching children about their environment and involving them in greening their neighbourhoods. The critical feature has been the recognition by The New York Botanical Garden that the form and impetus of the programs must be framed by and directly responsive to the needs and goals of the communities involved.

A key aspect of the program is the recognition that access, at no cost, to the material required by a given project is particularly crucial in areas with very limited economic resources. The co-ordination of access to the agencies and municipal services available in the New York area are essential to the processes of resource referral and technical assistance which are central to the program functions. The distribution of impressive quantities of donated materials, which Bronx Green-Up facilitates, assists in the reconstructive visions which are transforming The Bronx.

## RÉSUMÉ

KELLER, T. (1993). Communauté d'entraide: activité avec les deshérités et désavantagés grâce à l'horticulture.

Comptes-rendus du colloque "Nature et Jardins botaniques au XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle", Genève, 2-4 juin 1993.  
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Cette présentation générale fournira une description du Projet Bronx Green-Up, le programme "main tendue" du Jardin botanique de New York et ses effets positifs sur des communautés deshéritées et désavantagées de diverses ethnies dans le Bronx. Ce Programme, initialement établi en 1988, fait partie de l'affirmation des buts poursuivis par le Jardin botanique de New York, à savoir " de jouer un rôle responsable au sein de la Communauté."

Bronx Green-Up travaille étroitement avec des groupes de la communauté qui récupèrent dans leurs quartiers des terrains vagues appartenant à la ville. Ces terrains abandonnés ont jusqu'alors été utilisés comme déversoirs pour les ordures. Le but de ces projets est de transformer ces espaces en jardins et parcs gérés par la communauté. Durant cette transformation, ces espaces verts s'apprécient d'un point de vue immobilier et deviennent des centres d'activité.

Le programme Bronx Green-Up offre des cours sur le terrain et fournit de l'aide sur le plan technique et matériel, sous différentes formes. Par ailleurs, des relations sont entretenues avec des écoles, des crèches, des maisons de retraite, des services sociaux et d'autres groupes au sein de la communauté. Une partie du programme consiste à créer des ateliers et des projets vitaux, à donner un enseignement aux enfants en matière d'environnement, et à les faire participer à la transformation de leurs quartiers en espaces verts. L'aspect critique a été pour le Jardin botanique de New York de reconnaître que la forme et l'élan donnés aux programmes se doivent de varier selon les besoins et les buts des communautés concernées.

Un des aspects majeurs de ce programme a été de réaliser que l'accès au matériel pour un projet donné est particulièrement crucial, et que celui-ci doit être offert gratuitement notamment dans des endroits aux ressources économiques très limitées. La coordination avec les services municipaux et les agences chargées des affaires sociales dans le Grand New York est une tâche essentielle pour obtenir de l'aide sur le plan technique et matériel. La distribution de grandes quantités de matériel, facilitée par Bronx Green-Up représente d'ores et déjà et représentera dans l'avenir, une participation réelle aux visions de reconstruction qui transforment le Bronx.

One hundred years ago, a consortium of wealthy New Yorkers founded The New York Botanical Garden in the beautiful, bucolic Bronx, the northern most borough of New York City. It was hoped the garden would help visitors

- gain a greater understanding of the ways in which plants improve and enrich human life
- appreciate the need for ecological protection and preservation, and
- experience the sense of sheer enjoyment which green spaces allow.

But more than this, the garden was part of a larger community: a borough of more parks than anywhere else in New York City, a place where trees created cathedrals of the streets and where apartment buildings along the Grand Concourse were architectural treasures and open spaces abounded, orchards and even farms — a wonderful place to live and raise a family.

This was to change. The social unrest of the late 1960's and early 1970's was followed by a period of great decline in The Bronx. The mass exodus of the working middle class, along with the abandonment and burning of buildings, left a legacy of 10,000 vacant lots which became urban dumping grounds. Some desperate apartment dwellers had deliberately set their buildings on fire so that they would be given priority status for public housing. For others, burning buildings was an act of ultimate rejection of their neighborhood. Arson was, in effect, a communicable disease.

So it was that by the early 1980's, the garden was an oasis of green in a very troubled, unsightly, demoralized community. The neighborhoods near the Botanical Garden had changed drastically. The differences between the Garden and the communities outside was glaring:

- The Garden was green.

The communities were garbage strewn lots surrounded by mostly vacant, burnt-out buildings with occasional buildings still occupied.

- The Garden was protected — 250 acres of fenced-in beauty including 40 acres of original uncut north American forest with a glass conservatory which towered like a rare jewel above the trees.

The surrounding Bronx communities had little that was of beauty and residents had little to protect what property they had.

- The Garden's wonderful educational programs — classes in botany, botanical art and illustration, flower arranging, commercial horticulture, landscape design, etc. — seemed more relevant to outsiders.

The relevancy of gardening and botanical subjects was not apparent — or even known about — to the Garden's neighbors who were now living in a concrete, garbage-strewn, and decidedly unbucolic Bronx.

- The Garden had become a respite for long time New York residents, mainly white, who would drive to the Garden, or who lived in the more affluent neighborhoods of The Bronx

It seemed to exclude the ethnically diverse, underserved and disadvantaged communities that make up much of The Bronx today. People from the American South, the Caribbean Islands, or South and Central America — or even from poorer neighborhoods in other New York City boroughs — were not, by and large, visitors to the Garden.

But in 1988, these glaring differences were addressed, the needs of the community were recognized, and a fourth statement of the mission of The New York Botanical Garden was remembered: "to play a responsible part in our community." Bronx Green-Up was born—with funding secured by the Office of The Bronx Borough President, Fernando Ferrer. Five years, and over 170 gardens later, The Bronx is greening.

Bronx Green-Up works by working with people. Community groups are guided into reclaiming city owned lots in their neighborhoods—abandoned lots which have been used as dumping grounds for garbage, chemical and industrial waste... and often as gathering places for drug use. The focus of Bronx Green-Up projects is to turn these spaces into community managed gardens and parks. In the process, these green spaces become valued community assets and centers of activity—introducing pride and hope into whole communities. The people involved in making these gardens and park-like green areas are not just making pretty spaces. Much more is going on... a great deal is going on. People are growing vegetables, flowers and building communities. They are talking with their neighbors, encouraging their neighbors to be involved, working out plans for their garden: organizing, coordinating, and planting. Personal and community pride is felt by all who take part.

Bronx Green-Up functions as an integral part of the process, providing educational and technical assistance — either on site, bringing people into the classroom or on the grounds of The New York Botanical Garden. We also distribute plants, tools and seeds as they are donated to us by various nurseries and organizations. Our best source of first class plant material is from Rockefeller Center when they change displays. We deliver leaf compost from a neighboring town, using a truck and driver provided by the Garden, and when we are really lucky, we receive soil which we then

distribute. I need to emphasize here that the skills and training which staff members seek to impart are always framed in response to needs which have been articulated by members of the community. Plans for green spaces are not imposed but developed either wholly by community members or cooperatively with input from Bronx Green-Up staff.

Let me take you through the story of one community garden. First of all, let me explain that for years The New York Botanical Garden had been getting calls from Bronx residents interested in gardening. Most of these calls were shunted off to the horticulture department where callers were helped if it was something that could be taken care of with a phone call. With the establishment of Bronx Green-Up, all phone calls were directed to us... and so it was that our first phone call in 1988 was from Sister Cecelia.

Sister Cecelia had a problem. Her organization applied for a lease on a vacant lot via a city agency six months earlier and there was no communication from the agency even after repeated phone calls. The neighboring community had cleared space on the lot which was a chop shop lot—a place where stolen cars were stripped, parts sold, and drugs were dealt from the hulks of rusting cars. 80 young girl scouts were coming in a week to begin to garden with the scout leaders. After speaking non-stop, explaining everything in extreme detail, she asked, "How can you help?"

To make a long story short:

- We visited the lot, spoke with Sister Cecelia and saw first hand what she needed.
- We called the city agency in charge of leasing vacant lots to community groups and procured a lease for Sister Cecelia's group.
- Then we managed to get the sanitation department to haul away the stripped down cars.
- We were able to get soil for her from a place 50 miles away. A truck and driver from the parks department was used in exchange for half the soil.

Today that lot is gardened by over 25 families. People originally from the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Puerto Rico, and the southern part of the U.S. garden together.

This one community garden spawned five others in the same area. People saw what can be done and decided to do something about their own immediate blighted areas. In one area a new sidewalk was installed and new street trees planted. One of the community gardeners decided to run for elected office to serve on her community board where she is making a difference, helping to get better service for her neighborhood.

Oh, by the way, they named their garden, the "Garden of Happiness."

Along with many community groups, we work in conjunction with teachers and schools, day care centers, senior citizens, and drug rehabilitation centers. In the summer months, the core staff works closely with student interns who create vital workshops and projects which both teach children about their environment and involve them in greening their neighborhoods. Teachers interested in creating school gardens can attend workshops given by Bronx Green-Up staff and can call upon the staff for assistance in the actual gardens.

It is beyond the scope of this talk to give you examples of all of these wonderful projects, but I would like to tell you about Kendra Washington, a summer intern who returned to work for a summer in her own community. Let me tell you, in Kendra's own words, how she felt about working with Bronx Green-Up in her own community:

"Working within my own community was a very personal experience, especially when it involved the children of the area. Many of the kids in my community told me that they did

not believe we could change our environment; that they could never trust their so-called, and apparently ineffectual, leadership because they make only empty promises. I was particularly glad, therefore, to be part of a program that shows, through community gardening, that change is possible.

“When I first moved to my neighborhood, there were abandoned lots on every corner; dumping grounds for auto parts and garbage. One site, now known as the Garden of Youth, was then known as a “hot’ spot”, in other words, a site of heavy drug activity. Every morning as I walked to school, I had to pass drug dealers, never knowing when I could get caught in the crossfire. Yet virtually as soon as the Garden of Youth was created, the drug activity ceased. The reason for this is that the community is taking back their neighborhood, making it beautiful, claiming it as home.

“A community gardening program is more than finding an empty lot and planting a few flowers. It brings people together from different backgrounds to participate in something positive. It provides people with a sense of ownership and it gives them a sense of pride in where they live. But most of all, it shows that with a little push, change is possible.“

The volunteer program is also a very important part of Bronx Green-Up. Bronx residents are given free classes in horticulture and gardening and in return each participant gives 40 hours of time to help green The Bronx through our program. We have had 75 volunteers helping us, half of whom are still active. They have donated 3000 hours of time.

There are other greening agencies in New York City and we meet four times a year to share information in order to best serve our communities. At these meetings we share resource information and discuss how to obtain information, who and what to ask, what is available and where. This is all crucial information which is shared and, in turn, disseminated in the communities in which we work. Particularly important is sharing the “hows“ of negotiating with municipal bureaucracies.

The numbers of projects that a small group (4 staff plus 4 summer interns) can help is significant: 150 projects since 1988, 25 begun last year alone. Supplies given away to community gardens is in the order of thousands of packages of seeds, plants, trees, shrubs, perennials, annuals and vegetable plants each year, approximately \$15,000 worth of donated supplies. And we (the gardeners and ourselves) have fun doing all of this work! Each August we work with a community to have a garden party to which all Bronx gardeners are invited. Games for children, speeches by politicians and community leaders, as well as voter registration and music are part of the activities. The highlight of the day is the food contributed by all the gardeners. It is a gastronomic delight!

And another new tradition has been started. In December, when the New York Botanical Garden presents its holiday show, community gardeners gather inside the conservatory, that towering glass jewel. The community and its Botanical Garden join in another way as the 1/8 acre gardeners come to the 250 acre garden and celebrate. Again, the food is not catered, it is gardener created. This is a chance for Bronx community gardeners to show to all of New York City the amazing work they have done with their communities.

Through Bronx Green-Up, beautiful green spaces have changed bleak city streets... but just as important is the way people of different cultures work together to achieve that goal. Botanical Gardens can and should reach beyond the land they occupy... and it is as important to protect local habitats as it is to protect endangered regions on a global scale.