

COMMUNITY GARDENING



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Gardening in the time of COVID



COMMUNITY GARDENING

The magazine of the
American Community Gardening Association

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ACGA



AMERICAN
COMMUNITY
GARDENING
ASSOCIATION

ABOUT US

Founded in 1979, the American Community Gardening Association (ACGA) is American's oldest and most respected advocacy organization working on behalf of community gardening and related green initiatives in urban, suburban, and rural communities across the United States and Canada. We are a 501(c)(3) non-profit membership organization.

OUR VISION, MISSION, AND CORE VALUES

ACGA's vision is a sustainable community in every garden.

Our mission is to increase and enhance community gardening and other green initiatives across the United States and Canada.

We are a proactively inclusive and proudly diverse organization. Based on its record of success dating back more than a century in North America, we know that community gardening increases quality of life in many ways, among them by being a catalyst for beneficial neighborhood and community development; stimulating positive social interactions across generations and cultural differences; encouraging self-reliance; beautifying neighborhoods; producing nutritious food; reducing family food budgets; conserving resources; safeguarding the environment, biodiversity, soil and water; and creating healthful low cost opportunities for outdoor recreation, exercise, therapy, and education.

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IN THIS ISSUE

President's message	4
Cathy Walker, ACGA President	
From the Editor	5
Don Boekelheide	
Soldiers growing food	6
Andrea Muffly and Kirby Oliver, SFC	
Five lessons from reviving a family farm	9
Celina Ngozi Esekawu	
All the colors of a green space	12
Florence Nishida	
Green Thumb gardens help New Yorkers	17
Babbie Dunnington and Anthony Reuter	
Cultivating patient and community health	20
Michelle Gates and Lisa Hoare	
Emerging resilient from the pandemic	22
Susan Barker	
Community gardens essential for kids	25
Phronie Jackson	
Flourishing at Building Roots Farm	27
Kate Hamilton	
Book Review:	31
<i>City Bountiful:</i>	
<i>A Century of Community Gardening in America</i>	
By Laura Lawson	
Reviewed by Cordalie Benoit	
ACGA virtual/LA 2020 conference	33
Julie Beals	
Last word	35
Don Boekelheide	



Photos: (left) Faces from this issue. (Cover) Gardeners in Fort Worth, Texas, coping during the worst of COVID.



CATHY WALKER, PRESIDENT

*Mother Nature
does not know
the color of
your skin,
we are all equal
in the garden.*

Community gardening in challenging times

As community gardeners, farmers, educators and leaders, we don't succumb to issues like pandemics and problems. We conquer them.

Community gardening has been around for a long time. People turned to community gardening in the 1800s to confront social problems such as economic recession, wars, urban decline, and environmental justice.

Community gardens have withstood the Great Depression, wars, floods, heatwaves, and now COVID-19. We community gardeners are fighters. No matter what we are faced with, we continue to:

- **Provide a safe place for our families and neighbors to gather.**
- **Provide food for ourselves and those that are in need of food.**
- **Help lower crime in our neighborhoods.**
- **Help to save the environment by increasing the quality of the air we breathe.**
- **Most of all, help feed our families and lower our food bills.**

We as community gardeners need to continue to educate people on the importance of community gardens, healthy food, the environment, teaching our youth where food comes from, learning new science concepts, and gaining invaluable life skills. We can be a beacon of hope. We know that to whom much is given, much is required. We must also never forget that whomever controls our food controls us.

As ACGA President, I would like to thank you for your continued support of the American Community Gardening Association.

Mother Nature does not know the color of your skin, we are all equal in the garden. Never forget: You can always find a friend in the garden.

Cathy Walker is the President of the American Community Gardening Association. She lives, gardens, and urban farms in Atlanta, Georgia.

Community gardeners respond to COVID with creativity and hope

Community gardens thrive on adversity, have you also noticed that? COVID was a public health emergency on a global scale, yet community gardeners responded by creating sanctuaries, places to grow nutritious food, get outside in the fresh air, and even enjoy a reasonably safe opportunity to connect with friends (masked and socially distanced, of course).

COVID demonstrates the creativity, ingenuity, and hope that community gardeners show even in our darkest hours. From military families in Virginia recreating a garden on base to a single gardener in Texas finding her way back to her family's farming traditions; from established programs in major cities to innovative gardens at health centers and schools, community gardeners adapted, adjusted, invented, and persisted. Masked, gloved, and distanced, we showed up, to grow veggies, share food, and cultivate community.

In response to ACGA's request for stories in 2021, we received a bumper crop of stories about all aspects of community gardening, not simply about coping with COVID. In fact, you sent enough to fill three regular issues of our magazine! So, this edition is just the first crop this year! Coming soon are two sister editions, one focusing on gardening and growing (from pollinators to best lettuces), and the other on community garden research and management.

In this issue, we begin with stories where COVID played a central role. These diverse tales are engaging, inspiring, and filled with insights community gardeners can use in our own gardens, pandemic or not. Thanks to our contributors for sharing unique perspectives.

A personal note: Loyal ACGAers may notice that the name of our magazine has changed to "Community Gardening." We were formerly "The Community Greening Review", and before that "The Journal of Community Gardening." Of course, there's a Byzantine history behind all this. Bottom line: We remain ACGA. Community gardening, in all its glorious diversity, remains our mission. In two powerfully simple words, our new name says it all.



DON BOEKELHEIDE, EDITOR

Masked, gloved, and distanced, gardeners showed up, to tend veggies, share food, and cultivate community.

Don Boekelheide also edited the 25th Anniversary Edition of ACGA's magazine. He gardens at Reedy Creek Community Garden in Charlotte, North Carolina.



Fort Story, Virginia Soldiers growing food

ANDREA MUFFLY, KIRBY OLIVER

Gardening represents a number of American ideals: Love of country, independence, pride, and resilience.

Andrea is a Master Gardener who works with Fort Story Community Gardens in Virginia Beach VA, where she focuses on getting military families involved with gardening. Karen “Kirby” Oliver is married to Andrea and works alongside her at Fort Story Community Garden, where she focuses on crop planting schedules and staying on top of the compost system to make the garden more sustainable.

Finding meaningful engagement in a hands-on task is a comfort in our all-too-fast world. In our community garden at Fort Story, slowing things down, taking it step by step, and starting plants from seed builds resilience. Even our compost system provides a sustainable way to make an impact on the environment through everyday tasks. Taking it day by day, one seed at a time, may have been the only thing we could truly count on this past year. Like many others during the isolation of COVID, military families turned to community gardening as a meaningful way to connect with both nature and their community. Having a safe free outdoor space to connect in was a blessing that brought us back to our roots while it brought us together.

Located on Cape Henry at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, Fort Story is part of a joint service military base in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Fort Story is currently home to several hundred service members and their families. The site has a long and rich history, from the first landing of the Jamestown settlers in 1607 to providing coastal defense in both World Wars.

The Fort Story Community Garden was revitalized in 2020 after lying dormant for several years. In the fall, a small group of volunteers transformed the overgrown space into sixteen garden beds. After clearing, weeding, and preparing each bed for planting, twelve plots were leased out to military families for free. The remaining four plots were designated as a shared community area. The shared community plots are maintained by the volunteers and hold seasonal vegetables, herbs, and flowers donated by local nurseries and landscape companies. The community area harvest is shared with residents of Fort Story, so they can have access to fresh food 24/7 without leaving base.

Gardening represents a number of American ideals: Love of country, independence, pride, and resilience. This is not the first time soldiers have tried their hand at growing food. During the Revolutionary War, rations were extremely scarce, and soldiers were encouraged to grow their own vegetables. In the early to mid-1800s,



soldiers on the frontier were directed to set down their rifles and pick up their hoes in order to develop extensive on-base gardens. On the home front, the Liberty Gardens and Victory Gardens of WWI and WWII allowed citizens to support the war effort. This modern development of military community gardens during COVID is another link in the chain of gardening as a patriotic act.

Developing this garden during COVID allowed residents of Fort Story to connect with their neighbors and build community. The members of the garden range from novice first-time planters to Master Gardeners, and range in age from eight months up. In our weekly work groups, experienced gardeners were able to offer advice to newer gardeners, and children were able to plant vegetables for the first time. The sense of pride from growing your own food - and learning that radishes grow underground while tomatoes grow above ground - are things often lost in our busy world. COVID gave us the chance to slow down and get back to working with our hands.

With the vegetable and flower plots established, the group started to expand the scope of the garden to think about not only people, but also about pollinators. We planted a small pollinator

The photos show scenes from Fort Story garden, a place where kids are welcome. Courtesy of Andrea Muffly and “Kirby” Oliver.



Above: The pollinator garden with native plants. Left: A view of the garden.



patch along the outside of the fence using 100% native (to Zone 8A Virginia) plants. These plants will encourage beneficial insects and provide food and shelter for our pollinators. Due to generous plant donations, the small pollinator area now fills two of the outside borders of the garden. Swallowtail and Monarch caterpillars find both food and shelter in this garden in the fennel and milkweed plants. The garden has hosted two educational events on the importance of pollinators and how they support our food system.

Getting people to work with their hands and strengthen their own community has been well received, and the garden continues to grow. Many new families come to visit the garden each week and take part in the weekly Wednesday workdays and monthly events. Having a community garden allows residents of Fort Story a chance to meet their neighbors in a safe outdoor setting as the uncertainty of COVID precautions continues into the fall. It's strange to think that just like the Victory Gardens in WWI & WWII, this community garden is part of a trend that will be documented in history.

The gardeners on Fort Story are extremely proud of our garden. We hope to continue to expand and mature as a community and continue the rich American tradition of gardening.

For more information

about our garden please visit our website www.fortstorycommunitygarden.org and follow us on social media at "Fort Story Community Garden." Or send us an email at fortstorycommunitygarden@gmail.com

Arlington, Texas

Five lessons from reviving a family farm

CELINA NGOZI ESEKAWU

Amidst all the recent uncertainty, growing food and working with the earth offers me solace and hope. As a Black female grower, my passion for growing food has taken me down many paths over the years, including food sovereignty, coordinating community garden programs, and educating myself on Afro-Indigenous foodways. Yet, by 2020, I had become discouraged working on our family land. That is, until everything changed. Now, I am growing food and plant medicine on land that has been in my family for over six generations. Here are five lessons from reviving our family farm in rural Central Texas.

RESILIENCE: NOURISH THE SOIL

In June 2020, I was grief-stricken. It was hard to process the pandemic and racial violence while caring for my well-being. My body ached and I was depleted. I had to find a healthy release for this trapped energy. I stumbled upon an online Mexican folk medicine course. I enjoyed taking it and sought out herbal medicine workshops and other online courses, including an indigenous history class. I read books about herbal recipes from Black enslaved healers and African folk medicine practitioners.

While working to heal my personal pain, I found resources in Afro-Indigenous knowledge that could support my community. I learned that the resilience of Black and Brown people comes from their interconnection with the earth. I wanted to nourish the soil of our family land to reengage with that ancestral relationship, although for nearly two generations no one had farmed the land. By the fall, I had regained my strength enough to start preparing the garden beds of what would become Dry Bones Heal Farm.



Celina Ngozi grows food from the global south on her family land in Texas. She has her own business, Ala Soul Earthworks, and currently works to increase food accessibility as a farmers market specialist for Texas Center for Local Food. Contact her at ala7soul@gmail.com



I shifted my perspective from scarcity to abundance.

DIVERSIFY: SOW THE SEEDS OF HOME

I incorporate polyculture techniques into my garden design to promote good soil quality and ensure a productive harvest. During the planning stages for the farm, I needed to develop a design for an unirrigated rural space that was two hours away from where I lived. I considered challenges that I had not faced before, relying on information from the diverse community of folks I was growing with in urban gardens.

Last year, the community gardens I worked in became sanctuaries. Gardeners from different parts of the world produced food I had never seen growing in the US. The conversations and seeds we shared, and veggies we traded, were precious during isolated times. I learned about their growing techniques and that many staple foods in Asia were the same that my family grows in Nigeria. They taught me to care for the plants and prepare them.

Growing alongside immigrant and refugee folks inspired me to diversify my crops to include more drought-tolerant and culturally relevant foods. I planted bean varieties, cocoyam, ginger, sorghum, and peanuts to connect me to my African and US lineage.

BE RESOURCEFUL: NURTURE UNEXPECTED SPROUTS

My grief stemmed from loss – loss of life, loss of ways of life, and loss of my future plans. The only thing I had was our land. I stared out to the fields not knowing what my relationship with the land was. We had no running water, no livable houses, the family seemed disinterested, and we couldn't gather there for our annual work days. I was done. My dream to live and grow food out there seemed impossible.

Then, my mother started to transform a shed to a tiny home and some aunts moved a house to the property. By winter, they had a well and electricity.

Photos show perspectives on the Dry Bones Heal Farm. Courtesy of Celina Ngozi Esekawu

My mother and aunts saw potential when I could not. They encouraged me to plant seeds just to see what grows. I was apprehensive about it, but I worked up a couple of small patches and planted garlic as a low-risk test crop. After a couple of weeks, I saw garlic shoots. I started to stay there at the land, just to water and tend to the garlic patch. Having no understanding of what my future would be, I hoed up one small bed. That soon turned into twelve beds, plus a small field for my three sisters. My perspective shifted from scarcity to abundance. Like earlier generations on the land, I had to be resourceful and create community where everyone contributed to the well-being of all.

LET DREAMS BECOME REALITY: REAP WHAT YOU SOW

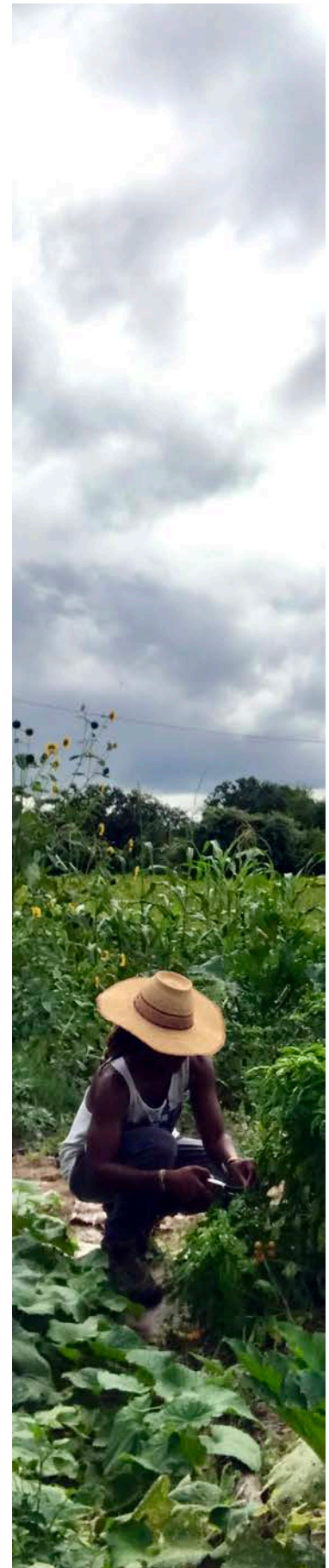
I had dreamed of growing food on our land for years, but it was out of reach because I lived out of state. Most of my formal agriculture experience and training was in Colorado, though my intention was to go home to grow. I remember writing my aspirations about farming the land on New Years 2018. I had just moved back to North Texas a couple of months prior, and I was figuring out what I was doing here. The climate was extremely different from Colorado. Most of what I knew about gardening in Texas came from watching my mother growing her peppers and tomatoes every summer, and from family members talking about what Granny, my great grandmother, used to grow and prepare.

I wanted to gain more experience, so I volunteered for garden projects and boards. I took a course on Texas land management, supported local urban growers, and worked in community gardens. I was eager to learn how to support the work needed to develop our land. Then the pandemic shifted everything. I let go of that dream, yet it became my reality.

REST: NOURISH THE SOUL

By winter, I was forced to rest and recharge. I conserved my physical energy and planned for next year. I started to be able to dream again, and ideas started to flood in. I decided to transition out of my job and to prioritize work on our land. By early 2021, I had reimagined my future, living on the farm and nurturing my community just as my ancestors had before.

Today, Dry Bones Heal is a thriving subsistence farm providing more than enough produce for my family and me. Losses turned to lessons, lessons that helped keep our family's legacy alive.





Los Angeles, California

All the colors of a green space

FLORENCE NISHIDA

First came the boy. Abruptly. Followed by the mother and little sister, dragged along by his impatient “C’mon!” He planted himself in my face, near the front gate of the Los Angeles Green Grounds Teaching Garden, and in a 8-year-old’s bellow proclaimed:

“I LOVE VEGETABLES! Are there any here?”

I was transformed - into his comedian’s sideman:

“Are there any vegetables here? ANY VEGETABLES? HERE? (Theatrical pause...) We are full of VEGETABLES! C’mon! See for yourself!”

As a teacher and Master Gardener, I introduce Los Angelinos, all ages, all kinds, to the panoply of vegetables and fruit growable in our practically perfect climate. Los Angeles boasts rare frosts, mod-

*“I LOVE
VEGETABLES!
Are there any
here?”*



Contributor Florence Nishida, life-long gardener, is the founder of LA Green Grounds.



erate heat, and maximum sunny days.

I led the boy and his family on an close-up-and personal tour: Dangling yard-long beans, six foot tall okra shrubs with stunning yellow flowers, dark-as-night Japanese purple mustard greens, wide spiny artichokes poised to swallow tasty misbehaving boys, deep magenta Malabar spinach vines, crisp sugar peas, chewy licorice-flavored fennel stems, and delectable Alpine strawberries. The boy's eyes widened in amazement at the taste. He jumped up and down with each discovery, fists clenched, pulling mom and sis along. He wanted more – NOW!

I cautioned that we were tasting the garden's vegetables so he could learn them, but that he must never just pull and taste plants without permission, especially berries. Mom had been tolerantly watching without expression as her son tugged her along, but when I repeated my warning in Spanish, she lit up. "You speak Spanish!" She said happily.

A BUDDING FOOD CRITIC?

Meanwhile, her son was impatient for more garden knowledge. He spotted a loquat tree.

"HEY!" He demanded. "Can you eat these, too?"

"Yes!" I said, handing him a fruit, suggesting he peel it first, since the skin tastes bitter to some. The boy chewed the loquat fruit thoughtfully, as if he were going to bid on a barrel of wine.

"It's sweet, like an apricot," he opined, "but kind of sour, a little bit like lemon." That captures the flavor perfectly. This young visitor may already on his way to stardom on the Food Network.

Whether or not that happens, I'm pretty sure we successfully

Food can be grown by one's efforts even in a small space

Photos feature gardeners, visitors, veggies, and scenes from Los Angeles Green Grounds garden. Courtesy of Florence Nishida.



planted the seeds for three future community gardeners.

The roots of LA Green Grounds stretch back to 2010, when I started teaching the first GLAVG (Grow LA Victory Garden) classes, sponsored by the University of California Cooperative Extension Master Gardener Program in Los Angeles County. They were held at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles. Reducing registration fees for residents of South L.A. living near the museum was not enough to bring them in, though they lived in a “food desert.” They were unused to formal classes at a museum.

My students and I decided that a better way to teach about food gardens would be through direct experience. Over the next four years, we built nearly three dozen front yard food gardens in South Los Angeles, as demonstration gardens that neighbors and passers-by would notice and hopefully emulate. The resident-host provided lunch for volunteers and agreed to work on two dig-ins for other families, but otherwise paid no money for the garden. I drew garden designs and grew seedlings, and an enthusiastic volunteer corps also grew in time. The best outcome was that people could see possibilities: Food can be grown by one’s efforts even in a small space. Food grown at home is fresh, accessible, and healthy. Even small gardens produce enough to share, sparking community and conversation among previous strangers.

In 2016, after gaining access to unused open land under power lines, LA Green Grounds broke ground for our teaching garden in south L.A. Again, we succeeded through volunteer power using hand tools. I soon realized that to become successful in growing food, new gardeners needed regular help – instruction, guided practice, and materials. Today, the LA Green Grounds Teaching Garden promotes true and permanent learning through an ever-growing group of dedicated amazing volunteers, the Garden Keepers, who work together, honing skills, teaching newcomers, and sharing produce, recipes and prepared dishes. This also grows community, trust, and increased knowledge of different cultures.

A WORLD OF VEGETABLE VARIETY

Our garden’s uniquely wide diversity of vegetables and herbs (48) and fruit trees (14) from around the world surprises visitors. They may leave with armfuls of Asian greens, fragrant lemon verbena, clouds of fennel pollen (a new obsession of chefs), sweet Kabocha squash, edible chrysanthemum, New Zealand spinach, and Jamaican Pigeon peas.

Los Angeles’ multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and diverse population



Los Angeles' multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, and diverse population eats an amazing variety of plants ... Healthy and tasty, they can and should be grown and eaten by everyone.

eats an amazing variety of plants, spices, and herbs at home. These promising potential garden crops are however frequently unknown outside a given cultural group, though everyone enjoys eating these vegetables in “ethnic” restaurants. Many of these foods are not widely available in supermarkets. Ethnic vegetables are often expensive because of limited demand due to low awareness and lack of knowledge about how to prepare them. Healthy and tasty, they can and should be grown and eaten by everyone.

LA Green Grounds’ garden, workshops, and outreach events promote growing at home to provide easy access to a world of vegetables, herbs, and fruits at very low cost. For people coming from a particular culture, familiar traditional foods can bring emotional comfort, pride in competence, and sense of security, especially in uncertain, stressful times.

FRIGHTENED FOOD CONSUMERS

Some consumers are fearful of entering markets, concerned about unmasked shoppers and poorly handled produce. Conventional industrial farming further contributes to food insecurity because of



threats to food safety from chemical and biological contamination. LA Green Grounds garden uses no sprays except water, relying on safe, non-chemical remedies to foil pill bugs (paper collars), earwigs (aromatic lures of oil, vinegar, soy sauce), butterfly nets, and quick hands.

Wildlife is welcomed, protected, and taught about in our garden. The Teaching Garden is designated a certified “Wildlife Habitat” by the National Wildlife Federation (<https://www.nwf.org/certify>). Encouraging visitors and gardeners alike to observe resident insects and spiders helps desensitize people to irrational fears of beneficial creatures. Seeing birds and butterflies fly and feed on berries, seeds, and nectar instantly calms people. A well-developed sense of nature’s wealth of forms, colors and strategies lifts people’s spirits.

Human visitors from the neighborhood, and walkers and bicycle riders from miles away, have discovered the garden. The food growing area is bordered by fruit trees, succulents, and California native plants. The Teaching Garden offers an island of green in the midst of pavement and traffic, where visitors can pause to rest in a quiet and shady sanctuary and even sample food. The entire garden is open at all times. There are no gates, because there are no fences. This is a truly welcoming space, open to all. Gardeners, neighbors, and strangers alike cherish and enjoy the tranquility of this unique green space of many colors, in the middle of one of the world’s largest cities.

Lifelong gardener Florence Nishida became a UC Extension Master Gardener after several careers: English teacher, research librarian, and mycologist. She directed creation of the first teaching garden at the Los Angeles Natural History Museum. The nearby neighborhood, a “food desert,” then became her focus. She founded LA Green Grounds (LAGG,) recruiting students to help residents learn to grow food in their own front yards.

Since 2016, LAGG’s unfenced teaching garden provides weekly informal garden classes, monthly workshops, vegetable tastings to promote healthy eating and home cooking. LA Green Grounds is a 501 (c)3 100% volunteer organization.

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New York, New York

Green Thumb gardens help New Yorkers cope with COVID

BABBIE DUNNINGTON AND ANTHONY REUTER

New York City's 550 NYC Parks GreenThumb community gardens are living and thriving despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Through innovative ways, gardeners are safely supporting each other in the midst of thousands of fellow neighbors, friends, and family impacted by the virus.

Through early September, 2021, the five boroughs of New York City suffered over 1 million confirmed cases of COVID and over 30,000 deaths. In the months of March and April 2020, the usual bustling, boisterous city streets became startlingly quiet except for the constant sounds of sirens. At the same time, thousands of New Yorkers lost their jobs. Communities struggled with adapting to iso-

Contributors Babbie Dunnington and Anthony Reuter are part of New York's Green Thumb community gardening program, within the city's Department of Parks & Recreation.



lation while mourning the losses of loved ones, neighbors, role models, and friends.

In the face of hardship and uncertainty, New Yorkers sprang into action, finding safe ways to care for each other. Mutual aid groups popped up spontaneously to address food insecurity all over the city, developing tight-knit communities in the face of isolation and bringing hope to a struggling city. Creative as ever, New York City community gardeners found new ways to connect to their communities through virtual garden tours, art installations, socially distanced community workdays, ‘zines, distributions of seeds, seedlings and food, and more.

GREEN THUMB STEPS UP

*Creative as ever,
New York City
community
gardeners found
new ways to
connect to their
communities*

NYC Park’s Green Thumb stepped up to do its part. The agency’s adaptations and support work, increased gardener participation, kept communities engaged, and shared resources needed for gardens to continue serving as community hubs.

Despite the limitations of COVID-19, GreenThumb delivered more than 110,000 plant starts, including heirloom vegetables and native perennial pollinator plants to 400 community gardens in 2020. GreenThumb staff published a planting guide online to help garden groups care for the plants they received. GreenThumb adapted programming to best serve over 550 community gardens across the five boroughs. They created 84 webinars on their website, and started a YouTube Channel. The agency also compiled an archive of resources on growing food, and created an online Growing Food Tool Kit. They moved three large community garden events online — the GrowTogether Conference, Earth Day, and Harvest Fair – and created ways to keep them interactive and engaging.

By moving workshops and written resources to virtual formats, the agency was able to engage with gardeners who typically could not attend in person, such as gardeners with disabilities, untraditional work schedules, and childcare needs. GreenThumb’s webinars and other virtual services were also accessed by people beyond

Photos show Green Thumb gardens and volunteers in action. Photos courtesy New York Parks Green Thumb.



New York City. Over 3000 participants, representing 945 gardens around the city, country, and world, attended GreenThumb’s workshops, and thousands more have viewed their videos and multilingual resources.

GreenThumb also moved in-person community design meetings to virtual formats, to continue helping gardens redesign and rebuild their gardens in the midst of the pandemic. Using new formats to collectively sketch out design plans with garden groups remotely, GreenThumb helped renovate 15 community gardens from March to July 2020. After collaboratively creating design plans with garden groups through virtual presentations, videoconferences, text messages, emails, and phone calls, GreenThumb brought the designs to reality by adding more than 375 planter boxes (raised beds,) plus two new chicken coops. The program also delivered more than 2,000 cubic yards of compost and soil to the city’s community gardens.

COVID couldn’t beat New York City gardeners. Instead, GreenThumb and NYC community gardeners innovated new ways to engage that helped the NYC gardening network to grow through the pandemic and flourish into the future.



Longtime supporters of ACGA, New York’s Green Thumb is a model for other cities, a publicly supported agency within the Parks Department that works with community gardening, enabling urban New Yorkers to access America’s favorite hobby, gardening, while increasing green infrastructure and food security.



Burlington, Vermont

Cultivating patient and community health

MICHELLE GATES, LISA HOARE

“Didn’t know what to expect, but it was like lights went on in my head, with the encouragements given on engaging in tree appreciation, birds, mindfulness...”

Michelle Gates is the Executive Director of the Vermont Garden Network, and Lisa Hoare is the Garden Educator with the University of Vermont Medical Center. They have collaborated with UVMCC primary care physician Dr. Michael Latreille to improve individual and community health through gardening and nutrition education.

We know health habits are a major determinant of chronic disease and poor health outcomes. In Vermont, the Department of Health has created a public awareness campaign called “3-4-50” to underscore the fact that three health habits (smoking, diet and exercise) contribute to four diseases (diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease and lung disease), accounting for more than fifty percent of deaths in the State.

People in poor health know they should eat healthier, exercise more, and reduce stress, but often lack the resources, skills, and confidence to make changes on their own. Many lack adequate nutrition understanding or culinary know-how to create healthy meals. Even access to fresh vegetables can be challenging, and getting your family to enjoy them even more so!

Gardening for Health is a comprehensive health program with a gardening focus, connecting concepts of physical activity, healthy eating, and mindfulness by workshopping them actively in a shared garden space at the University of Vermont Medical Center. In designing Gardening for Health, we not only hoped to teach people how to grow some of their own food, but also to create a holistic health improvement program while demonstrating the many benefits of gardening.

What did we learn in our first-year pilot of the program? Be adaptable!

We launched Gardening for Health in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, but with creative modifications we enrolled 59 participants and grew approximately 550 pounds of food!

There were even some silver linings from the health crisis. Interest in gardening and local food exploded, and people were hungry for access to fresh, whole foods and gardening education. Participants were thrilled with the harvests they took home. They appreciated the hands-on gardening lessons, and we were pleased to hear how valuable the nutrition and mindfulness components were to their experience. A few comments from our post-pilot survey illustrate



the program's impacts, please take a look at the sidebars for a representative and inspiring collection of participant observations.

We implemented part two of our pilot this past season. To date, the program has been available at no cost to patients with diabetes, pre-diabetes, and associated risk factors. We are planning similar workshops for patients enrolled in pain management and cancer survivor programs next spring.

Our hope is to build a model for incremental and sustainable expansion to serve other patient populations and locations.

If you'd like more information about Gardening for Health, please contact Michelle Gates, michelle@vcgn.org, or Lisa Hoare, lisa.hoare@uvmhealth.org, or visit www.uvmhealth.org/medcentergardening or the Vermont Community Garden Network at <http://www.vcgn.org>.

“Before, I saw gardening as just a hobby, now I see it as a way to get healthier...”

“I found myself motivated to eat more fresh food and incorporate different vegetables into breakfast and snacks where I might not have opted to prior to taking this class.”

“Reminded me how easy and simple preparing healthy food can be!”



Fort Worth, Texas

Emerging more resilient from the pandemic

SUSAN BARKER

Tarrant Area Food Bank's Learning Garden produces three thousand pounds of produce a year for local food pantries and serves as the foundation of our Community Garden program. It is a quarter-acre garden run by two part-time staff and powered by 5,000 volunteer hours each year.

The COVID-19 pandemic turned so much upside down and we were not immune to that. Starting in March of 2020, due to federal, state, and local restrictions, we could not host volunteers in the garden or in any other aspect of the food bank's work. This came at a time of unprecedented need in our community.

Susan Barker coordinates the Neighborhood Farmers Market program and supports the Community Garden program at Tarrant Area Food Bank in Fort Worth, Texas.

Tarrant Area Food Bank went into emergency relief mode. Instead of our regular duties, our Community Nutrition team was tasked with supporting our Mission Kitchen preparing meals for families facing unemployment and food insecurity. We also supported our food bank’s emergency food distribution efforts, including at weekly “Mega Mobile” food distributions, serving thousands of families each week. With new protocols and recommendations emerging every day, we struggled to maintain our support of the emergency response while keeping our garden and other programs alive.

LAUREN’S EXTRAORDINARY EFFORTS

Lauren Hickman, who leads our Learning Garden project, made extraordinary efforts to fulfill new and pre-existing demands. She found time to water and harvest and weed the garden, while creating new protocols for sanitizing and produce donation with our local food pantries. But one person tending a garden usually maintained by 5,000 volunteer hours each year in the form of two or three volunteer workdays each week? Lauren needed help! Our Community Nutrition Director, Micheline Hynes, successfully applied for a group of AmeriCorps members, without whom we would not have been able to keep up with the needs of the garden.

Lauren led the AmeriCorps members to become gardeners – cultivators of food, composters, waterers, and weeders. Wearing face coverings in the hot Texas spring and into the sweltering summer, their desire to help the community gave our volunteers the motivation to labor alongside Lauren, donating fresh produce weekly to our partner agencies and maintaining the Learning Garden where community garden leaders could come to find inspiration, instruction, and support.

In the chaotic turmoil of the pandemic, our gardens grounded us



Photos of the many facets of the Fort Worth/Tarrant Area Food Bank garden projects, including the organization’s mural. Courtesy of Susan Barker.

The increase in interest in our community to grow food locally stemmed from the desire to build resilience in the face of food-supply interruptions, social injustices, and isolation in the time of COVID-19. Our network of supports for community gardeners grew in response. We adapted to offer our gardening workshops virtually and developed a more formal set of supports for community gardeners at every phase of their development: planning, installing, producing, and becoming established.

OUR GARDENS GROUND US

As the crops in the Learning Garden grew and our community garden network developed, our gardens gave back. In the chaotic turmoil of the pandemic, our gardens grounded us in the comfort of the expected: the seeds sprouting, the crops developing, the foreseen and regular seasonal changes – this familiarity in process and timing of garden life helped us keep our sanity and humanity together during such a stressful time with so many unknowns and constant unexpected changes. We felt such a strong need for a space that made sense, a space that we understood so well, and that space was in the garden.

The garden brought forth in us strengths we hadn't seen: Our staff's absolute grit, our director's unsurpassed ingenuity, the bold heroism of AmeriCorps members, and the inspiring food activism in our community, all helped us gardeners connect to the trusted rhythms in our gardens, and to come out of the pandemic stronger and more resilient. We found a new understanding of our plants' desire to grow and a new joy in our role of encouraging the crops in our gardens while encouraging one another. We hold a new gratitude for our gardens, and a more expansive vision of our capabilities.

Susan wants to thank her colleague, Lauren Hickman, “for welcoming me into the Tarrant Area Food Bank Learning Garden as a volunteer years ago, for mentoring me as I become a garden leader myself, and for showing me the magnificence of a woman driven to keep a garden alive. You are a gift to the garden and to the gardeners.”



Community gardens essential for kids (and parents, too!)

PHRONIE JACKSON

In Washington DC, restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic were transformed into opportunities for youngsters to safely learn about gardening and enjoy outdoor exercise, thanks to the Grow Kids Garden Program (GKGP.) The children loved it (and so did their parents!)

In response the pandemic in 2020, Washington DC enacted strict stay-at-home orders. Residents were encouraged to do their part to flatten the COVID curve by washing their hands frequently, wearing mask and face coverings, and observing social distancing by keeping at least six feet from others. Residents were told to only leave their homes for essential activities, such as buying food, obtaining medicines, and physical exercise. Government agencies and businesses closed for in-person services, and local school systems moved to an all virtual teaching format. This resulted in parents attempting to homeschool while working from home, sometimes competing for the use of technology. This was challenging for families.

Community gardens were allowed to open during the pandemic. Like grocery stores and medical providers, gardens were granted an exemption as essential services. Gardens provide essentials that people lose during stay-at-home orders, such as fresh food, physical activity, and relaxation to reduce stress and improve mental health. Gardeners, however, had to adhere to strict COVID protocols including wearing face coverings and social distancing while gardening.

KIDS GARDEN DURING PANDEMIC

Gardening had been an excellent outlet for children. Many DC schools utilize school gardens and outdoor classrooms as complements to teaching. In Washington's Ward 5, the Ward 5 Health Coalition introduced a program to enable children to visit gardens during the pandemic, the Grow Kids Garden Program (GKGP). GKGP



Contributor Phronie Jackson, PhD, is founder of WALK/Ward 5 health coalition in Washington, DC. She is a professor of Health Education at the University of the District of Columbia. Drawing on her decades of experience in public health, Dr. Jackson incorporates urban agriculture, community gardening, and hydroponics in her work in public health and community leadership.

was created out of a necessity to assist parents manage challenges during the stay-at-home order. GKGP's goals were to provide an opportunity for young kids to get outside and get physical activity in a community garden during the stay-at-home order, to encourage the children to learn about healthy foods from seed to consumption, and to provide a respite for parents for a few hours each week.

A CROP OF NEW GARDENERS

The pilot GKGP was implemented with a cohort of elementary age children from the same family, who were picked up from home and taken to the Langdon community youth garden. There, they were given instructions and a demonstration of garden techniques. They gained hands-on experience germinating seeds and transplanting seedlings.

Each child was assigned a section of a garden plot to weed (their least favorite task) and water (of course, their most favorite task!)

The children were surprisingly excited about harvesting and trying different vegetables. They also cut fresh flowers to take home to their moms and families.

After an hour of working in the garden, the kids still had plenty of energy for playing on a nearby playground.

GKGP provided lunch and transportation home. Activities took place twice a week from May 2020 through September 2020, with each garden visit lasting about two-and-a-half hours.

During the program, some children even started gardens at home to grow peppers and tomatoes. Not only did GKGP give kids a chance to safely get outside during COVID (while giving parents a welcome break), it also sowed the seeds for a new generation of enthusiastic urban gardeners.

These pictures from the GKGP community garden tell the story. That gardens and growing veggies fascinate children is something even a mask can't hide. Photos courtesy Phroie Jackson.





Toronto, Ontario

Flourishing at Building Roots Farm

KATE HAMILTON

Building Roots urban farm at Ashbridge Estate in Toronto, Canada, is small. There's not a lot of room in a city, and only about a dozen of us working there. But Building Roots is mighty, mighty enough to transform worrying times to reliable joy, from May through October. What's our secret? Magic.

There's the obvious: From minuscule specks of seed and spindly three inch seedlings, we produce FOOD. That's powerful magic indeed! We grow peppers, tomatoes, peas, beans, zucchini, bitter melon, turnips, kohlrabi, garlic, chard, mint, dill, thyme, basil, and more. We know the seed needs to be in the right place (for sun), with the right resources (water and good soil), and the right helpers

Contributor Kate Hamilton is Urban Farm Manager at Building Roots in Toronto, Canada.



(soil micro-organisms, plus gardeners to add a supportive stake here, prune suckers there, and mindfully manage weeds, pests and diseases everywhere).

THE MAGIC OF CHILDREN AND SEEDS

It is like helping a child to flourish, as they grow up to become a poet, a cook, an engineer, an analyst, or, who knows, maybe a farmer. Both seed and child need many things to come together – a suitable environment, resources, and helpers, plus time. But magic is afoot, too. We don't know precisely how a tiny seed becomes a towering corn plant, and even less about how children explore and develop talents. Watching the creative and mysterious unfold is a joy that nourished the Building Roots farm crew every week (and sent a few of us to botany books!)

Building Roots is volunteer-powered, raising food not for ourselves but for distribution at the Moss Park Market year-round. Kindness and generosity are more magic, among the greatest. Our dozen growers joined a river of human decency flowing through this year. We also produced food for bees and other pollinators, with borage, yarrow, dill, cosmos, zinnia, apple blossoms, and clover. Over the season, we put in more than 800 hours. Why? Making a gift of time and attention is very satisfying and more-ish. There are reductionist explanations for this (a boost of oxytocin is one) but the experiential fact is that we're social beings and like to connect.

At the farm, masked and distanced, we are engaged in a collaborative project, connecting strongly with each other, with the people who eat what we produce, with the warm-hearted staff at our host, the Ontario Heritage Trust, and with a dozen businesses and organizations that generously support our farm. To name just four: Miceli's Seasonals gifted us 15 (!) flats of seedlings; Lazy Daisy Café provided coffee grounds for use as a soil amendment; FoodShare through the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) gave garlic to plant and a beautiful cedar 3-bin composter. With our participation, Not Far From The Tree delivered a few hundred pounds of organic fruit to the Moss Park Market (and Manning Canning turned some of that into jars of applesauce for the market.)

Like nutrient and water cycles in ecology, this too is a virtuous and life-sustaining cycle, a magical flow. Resources flow to us that we put to use for others, which in turn empowers recipients to do more for the people they encounter. To all who supported the urban farm this year, our deepest thanks for enabling this flow of goodness.

We also gave to each other. Blueberry muffins were on that wonderful list, along with nasturtium pesto, green-tomato chutney, kombucha starter, gecko keychains, plus connections beyond the farm to mushroom foraging, tai chi in the park, and more. There was shared learning, too, with ad hoc workshops on pruning, propagating, raising caterpillars to butterflies, hugelkultur, plant families, Three-Sisters plantings, tying secure knots and splices, and the list goes on. The Building Roots urban farm is a learning place!

A GARDEN SANCTUARY AMIDST THE CHAOS

Each week in our garden, we turned our backs on hot pavement, scary pandemics, deadlined projects, and odious politics to spend a sunny morning surrounded by trees, flower beds, and birdsong, collaborating with companionable others in light physical exercise with a kindly and creative purpose. That put checkmarks in the boxes for the major factors that contribute to personal and social well-being.

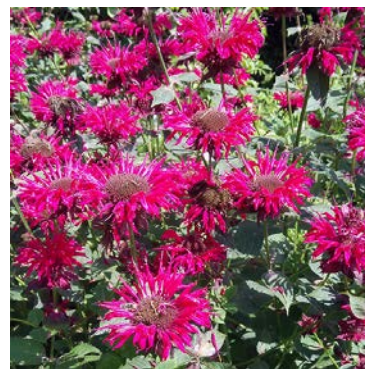
So, that's how Building Roots helped this otherwise difficult time paradoxically transform into magical months of laughter, abundance, and delight. This explains how we at Building Roots urban farm, starting from tiny seeds, are able to nurture our mission of social cohesion. To manifest its potential, social cohesion, like a seed or a child, needs a nourishing environment, resources, and helpers. And time.

My wish going forward, whatever else is going on, is that ever more of us, and Building Roots and all community gardens and farms, will engage in the small magics that give others and ourselves the joy of flourishing.

The kindness of people to each other is another magic, one of the greatest there is.

Photos show the many facets of Building Roots, from meetings on the grass to pollinator plantings. Photos courtesy Kate Hamilton.





COVID: A PERSONAL VIEW

Building Roots has always been committed to cultivating vibrant and resilient communities. COVID-19 put that mission to the test. On March 12, 2020, everything changed. We refocused on three specific goals:

- Providing food for the most vulnerable in our community
- Offering at-home educational and recreational resources for children, families and seniors in need
- Ensuring access to vital information about COVID-19 and government supports that they would not otherwise have received.

We quickly connected with residents, partner agencies, community leaders, and volunteers to achieve these goals. With gratitude, great learning, and even greater collaborations, in the first 25 weeks of Community Helping Community, working together, we accomplished:

- 6000+ food bags of fresh and local produce, non-perishable staples, and delicious meals and treats distributed to 300 households
- 500+ activity kits procured and distributed to children and families, as well as 1000+ books and coloring books with works of local artists, with a focus on promoting mental health
- 200 Veg2Grow Kits for Kids to families in Downtown East Toronto, so children could learn how to grow food safely from their homes
- 25+ socially distanced performances by Black, Indigenous, women, people of color and LGBTQIP2SAA+ musical artists and dance performers. We worked with community members to animate public space so everyone could safely enjoy the summer.

These have not been easy times for anyone. Thank you for being part of our story of hope.

To find out more, please visit buildingroots.ca.

In her blog, Kate Hamilton shared practical and inspiring suggestions for coping with COVID in a series titled “Keeping It Together,” addressing well-being of mind, body, and spirit. “My best project was to start learning to play a recorder.” Hamilton blogs. “I have zero music training, but Value Village had a recorder for \$3.... Music tunes up the brain (pun!), so that’s a 3-in-1: Learning, brain agility, and (someday...) music.” Community music fits perfectly with community gardens. A good resource if you’d like to join Kate for duets (or trios, or...) is the American Recorder Society (ARS,) americanrecorder.org, offering a wealth of resources including online classes.

American community gardening

Growing strong for over 130 years.

CORDALIE BENOIT

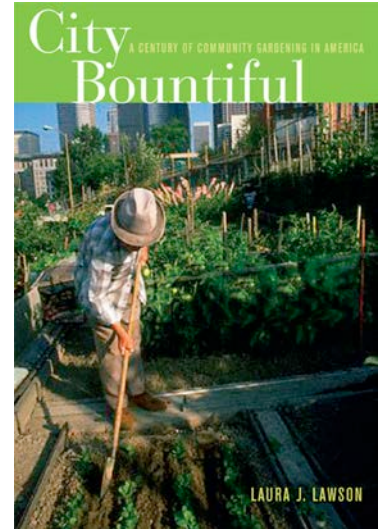
Although worthy of space on any scholar's reading list, the lively writing of this book is eminently readable by anyone interested in the history of community gardening. It is the comprehensive story of 100 years of urban community gardening starting in 1890. It is a must read for social and political students of food, community development, or government policy during crisis.

The history of the first thirty years and the function of the American Community Gardening Association is also elucidated.

From this amazing compilation of information from a vast array of sources, lessons can be drawn. Gardening programs that are organized in response to crisis do not endure. Fundamental actions organizing gardens in the furtherance of positive goals are more sustainable. Top-down solutions can fall from their own heights. Grassroots accomplishments persist and often reverberate with accomplishments beyond the original project, but well-organized top-down garden programs can succeed if based on clear, constructive objectives, centered on the many pleasures of community gardening so as to fully engage the participants who must ultimately cultivate and care for the site. Grassroots projects need institutional support for site security and permanent integration into the urban fabric.

FOOD FOR THE POOR

Beginning in the 1890s urban community gardens were seen as a way for the poor or the idle to provide food for themselves and their families, sometimes through vacant lot gardens, school gardens, Depression-era relief gardens, and victory gardens. During war times, the urban garden movement was embraced by all classes of American to supplement the food supply, as farm production was diverted to the war effort and abroad. Later, urban gardens were created as



City Bountiful:
A Century of Community
Gardening in America

by Laura J. Lawson

Reviewer Cordalie Benoit, is Vice President of ACGA. She is a Connecticut attorney. She holds a Master's in Environmental Management from Yale University.

Top-down solutions can fall from their own heights. Grassroots accomplishments persist.

an anti-blight tool. The moral uplift narrative, self-help skills, and personal responsibility lessons that group gardening offers were the pervading atmosphere of most programs.

Historic and current pictures enliven the text. The index, endnotes and the comprehensive bibliography embodied in the notes could lead one to a lifelong study of the urban gardening movement, but as the author knows, a gardening program's history, design, goals, and motives are often best revealed when gardens are visited in person among the gardeners. Many of the photos were taken by the author during her tour of urban gardens though out America.

LESSONS LEARNED FROM HISTORY

Luckily for the America's community gardening movement the lessons learned have been fully embraced by many communities. Urban garden programs are proliferating and sustaining at an astonishing rate. School garden programs are again being integrated into school curriculum.

And, as this issue of our magazine amply demonstrates, since the COVID 19 crisis more people of all stripes have turned to the joys of gardening then ever before, many in urban community gardens.



A public school victory garden project in 1944 in Washington, DC. Roger Smith, photographer. Source: Library of Congress.



“Digging for Victory” ACGA 2020: Los Angeles/Virtual

ACGA virtual conference yields real-world success

JULIE BEALS

I was thrilled when the American Community Gardening Association Board decided to hold the 2020 ACGA Annual Conference in Los Angeles! We formed a local Host Committee, and decided to hold the conference at Hollywood Hotel and the adjacent East Hollywood Community Garden, site of the Los Angeles Community Garden Council’s new office.

Then came COVID-19. Los Angeles was locked down on March 13th, 2020. As COVID cases continued to rise, we had no choice but to change plans. We decided to move ahead with ACGA’s first-ever online conference. We changed the theme of the conference to “Digging for Victory,” to echo the improvised vegetable gardens during WWII. We wanted to emphasize the role community gardens played in the current crisis, providing fresh produce to the increasing numbers of people experiencing job loss and homelessness.

We took a crash course in Zoom technology, and required workshop proposals to include a short video. We were not sure what

The 2020 ACGA Virtual Conference became the best-attended ACGA conference ever

Julie Beals served as the Executive Director of the Los Angeles Community Garden Council (LACGC) for seven years, and headed ACGA conference local preparations. She grew up in the UK where she learned gardening from her grandparents. A member of the Episcopal clergy, she cultivates social and economic justice as part of the community gardening movement.



to expect. Then, on Saturday morning at 8 AM, August 8th, almost 300 avid community gardeners from all over the world logged in. We opened with words from ACGA President Cathy Walker and myself, followed by our keynote presentation from Alberto Tlatoa, co-Founder of South Central Farm.

Participants were then invited to select five workshops to attend during the rest of the day. Translation into and out of Spanish was available. We hosted 20 workshops on themes including the history and health benefits of community gardens, soil management, growing herbs, healthy cooking, fermentation, and crowdfunding for community gardens. All presenters did an excellent job.

Following the final workshop sessions, we showed video tours, with live narration, of twelve community gardens in Los Angeles County including one taken by a drone over the East Hollywood Community Garden.

The conference ended with a Meet and Greet with the ACGA Board Members and Host Committee Members followed by a virtual party complete with a scavenger hunt. The hunt became highly competitive! Who knew that cooperatively-minded community gardeners would be so eager to be the first to find seeds, a shovel, or other gardening items around their homes during the lockdown?

The most essential element in this successful event was our volunteers, whom we cannot thank enough for their tireless work. We met our financial goal for the conference, thanks to generous sponsorships from DIG, Food Well Alliance, Gardener’s Supply Company, Garden Manager, Los Angeles Community Garden Council, Metro Atlanta Urban Farm, Santa Monica Community Gardens, Sylmar Agriculture, Urban Patch, USDA, and The Weybright Family.

The 2020 ACGA Virtual Conference became the best-attended ACGA conference ever. 50 percent of participants were attending an ACGA conference for the first time. Many stated that the cost of travel and accommodation had deterred them from attending past conferences. Going forward, we decided that there should be an online element to all ACGA annual conferences, even after we are all fully vaccinated against COVID-19. Hosting a virtual conference helped us share our Southern California sunshine and creative perspectives with our friends and fellow gardeners in ACGA, across the continent and around the world.

Photos: P33 LSCGC members demonstrate gardening while social distancing. P 34, from top: Garden leader Julie Beals: A conscientious scarecrow wears her mask: The 2020 conference logo: A view of the LA’s South Central Farm before it was destroyed: Alberto Tlatoa, 2020 keynote speaker at the site of the farm. Facing page: Monage of the South Central Farm’s history. Photos courtesy LACGC, LAlist/KPCC, and Creative Commons (Jonathan McIntosh).

LAST WORD



Los Angeles was once home to the largest urban garden in the US, the South Central Farm. As a kid, Alberto Tlatoa, ACGA's 2020 keynote speaker, learned to garden there from his dad. Then, as a teen, Tlatoa wept when his garden was brutally destroyed, despite community resistance, by a system that values greed over food, family, and justice. Sprouting from the darkness of the Rodney King beating in 1991, the garden had become a green productive oasis for nearby residents. Ignoring this, the city did the bidding of developers and razed the farm in 2006. Then, for decades, the good soil that had nurtured flowers and food lay exposed beneath the baking sun behind a rusty chain-link fence. Tlatoa and his community fought on, but, as COVID began to rage, four hideous warehouses got the OK. Facing a street named for Martin Luther King, they now occupy the site like the set of a dystopian sci-fi flick. It's tragic, but that's not the whole story. Tlatoa is still speaking out (and still farming). He's not alone, either. There are podcasts and even movies that tell the South Central story. I notice those ugly warehouses have flat roofs. Might be a good spot for a rooftop farm, with solar panels. In community gardening, we sometimes lose a garden. As South Central teaches us, no mistake, we always sprout again. It's the gardener's way. -Don Boekelheide

Photo montage shows scenes from the history of the South Central Garden, with the farm at its height as the background. By DB.

If you get the opportunity, hear Alberto Tlatoa. He's a gifted storyteller with an important message. As he says, it's important to share both successes and failures. In addition to ACGA 2020, Tlatoa has been a speaker for Denver Urban Gardeners and other groups, and on podcasts.

Note: The opinions expressed those of the columnist, and not necessarily those of ACGA.

IN THIS ISSUE

A look at the many creative ways community gardeners dealt with COVID-19 and other challenges, from New York City to Los Angeles, and from Vermont to the plains of Texas. Stories that inspire hope, solidarity, and bountiful gardens.

Front cover and back cover:
Pandemic scenes from the
Tallant Area Food Bank in Fort
Worth, Texas. Photos: Susan
Barker



ACGA



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