

Abby Schoneboom
December 15, 2004
Prof. Mitch Duneier
Seminar on Ethnographic Research

Why People Garden

In 1975, British TV audiences fell in love with *The Good Life*, a new sitcom about a suburban couple who give up their middle class lifestyle to devote themselves to working the land in their back garden. The protagonist, Tom Good, resigns from his lucrative job as a designer of plastic toys for cereal packets and throws himself, along with his wife Barbara, into pig-rearing and vegetable growing. The humor of the show derives from the seeming absurdity of the wish to give up modern conveniences and work the soil, yet simultaneously makes fun of the banality of a life disconnected from nature.

The ARROW vegetable garden has something of *The Good Life's* absurdity to it. It is an improbable patch of bare earth that exists in amongst the warehouses and junkyards of Queens, its 20 grave-sized plots caged in by a tall iron fence that seems to have been put there to hold back the asphalt. Vegetable gardeners in this built-up setting are anomalous, eccentric even. The local supermarkets piled year-round with cheap garlic, yams, fresh herbs, and lettuce mock their efforts as much as the quizzical looks from passers-by – often local children who ask, “you mean you can eat that?”

As if confirming its own absurdity, the vegetable garden is in fact in something of a crisis. It has only a handful of active members and its former successes in attracting funds and community involvement have sprouted a large community center and playground that has led ultimately to a sharp reduction in the amount of space available for vegetable growing. In addition, the garden has been plagued by organizational difficulties that have created discontinuities in leadership and resulted in loss of membership. However, the garden's

proponents remain committed to its future and passionate about the personal and societal benefits of community gardening. Using the testimony of two of the garden's major advocates, Sandra Robishaw and Joan Herrera, this paper explores the passion for gardening and attempts to look beyond the vegetable garden's current decline toward a more hopeful future.

Childhood Gardens

ARROW's gardeners do not see themselves as oddballs. Sandra Robishaw, one of ARROW's founders, learned gardening as a child from her grandmother in Texas, "She grew very aromatic plants like tomato plants ...and it was a pretty large vegetable garden. It was just so satisfying to be actually eating the things that you had gone out there and enjoyed growing." Joan Herrera, a full time Parks employee who runs the community center but also spends a lot of time tidying up the ARROW plots, feels that gardening connects her with her teenage years in Ireland. Her mother was an avid gardener and a representative, according to Joan, of the historical importance of the right to land in Irish culture.

For both Joan and Sandra, early exposure to gardening through beloved family members and through cultural identification with the land makes it not only a legitimate activity but also one that is connected to warm and pleasurable memories. Sandra explains how, as an adult, gardening has become an important means of escaping the stresses of child-rearing and work, and accessing a space where, "I couldn't really make a mistake and it was such a forgiving environment...[I felt] this connection with my grandmother – of this unqualified love and peace, a sort of peacefulness where you couldn't do anything wrong." Talking of her early gardening experiences working alongside her mother, Joan muses, "You came away with endless hours of relaxation, endless hours of peace and contentment, endless hours of being de-stressed. So this was the fruits of your labor even if you didn't manage to grow anything."

The connection that gardeners feel to their childhood experiences is one of the themes explored in *A Place to Grow*, which captures the voices of poor and working class urban gardeners in San Francisco. Recalling the pleasure of eating his first produce from the community garden, Eugene Mattox reflects, “I started realizing I’d had fresh beans before. It was like a throwback to when I was a child and they used to grow stuff directly out of the garden” (14). Childhood, for such gardeners, often represents a time when vegetables were seasonal and often locally produced and therefore tastier and fresher. As Derek Jarman, the British filmmaker who created a cottage garden in front of the Dungeness nuclear power station during his last years recalls in his book *Modern Nature*, “Even the humble apple has succumbed. Tough green waxy specimens have eradicated the varieties of my childhood, the pink-fleshed August pearmain, the laxtons and russets; only the cox seems to have survived the onslaught” (54).

Personal Healing

Although childhood associations are clearly a powerful motivator in bringing people to the garden, the benefits they seek to recapture are innate to the practice itself. Joan often tidies the garden plots to clear her head when she is dealing with tense situations in the community center, spending hours weeding, digging, and raking. “I don’t see it as work because it clears my mind, it helps me see things from a fresh perspective.” She also observes that the children at the center respond well to her when she is working in the garden, “The children recognize it as hard work but they noticed that I didn’t seem to be in any way stressed out – that I seemed to be enjoying myself.”

Many gardeners work the land to relieve the stress that they experience in their work or home life. Monty Don, one of Britain’s most popular TV gardeners writes in his autobiography about how gardening helped him to cope with the bouts of serious depression that plagued his

life as a small business owner: “Gardening combines all the beneficial qualities of sunlight, weather, activity, and a sense of purpose. It is the ideal activity to heal mind hurt” (46). Don, who eventually gave up his business to become a full-time gardener and writer, says, “If I go for a few days without gardening – not telly-gardening but proper everyday digging, planting or weeding – I become restless and dissatisfied” (22).

A key aspect of the relaxing effects of gardening is the way in which time is experienced in the garden. Joan observes that time seems to pass more slowly for her in the garden, but not in the sense that it might drag in an office. Rather she feels herself to be immersed in the rhythm of the work and experiences as pure enjoyment the physical sensation of being outside, and being in contact with the soil, “I’ve been known to spend 4 and 5 hours in there and they have to drag me away...I might have spent my whole shift in there trying to sort it out.”

Derek Jarman, who was dying of AIDS as he built his garden, beautifully captures the passing of time in a garden as contrasted with the urban environment, “The gardener digs in another time, without past or future, beginning or end. A time that does not cleave the day with rush hours, lunch breaks, the last bus home. As you walk into the garden you pass into this time – the moment of entering can never be remembered” (30). A garden, by contrast with the fast-paced world outside, cannot be rushed and must unfold at its own pace, a process that creates tranquility. As Emmanuel Delgado, a teenager on probation in San Francisco’s Summer Sprout program, says in *A Place to Grow*, “You’re calm with a garden. That’s a feeling I like, being calm, relaxed. You don’t push it past the point. You can’t speed it up, you can’t slow it down. You’ve got to let it grow by itself” (57). Similarly, Don points out the need to slow down and get to know one’s garden intimately, if one is to be successful, “This familiarity cannot be cheated.

You need to discover where the sun falls or casts an unlikely shadow, where the wind nips in and where a seemingly flat space has a fall unnoticed by the eye” (50).

Community Building

In building the garden, ARROW members sought to extend some of these benefits to the community as a whole. The garden was created in response to a survey by ARROW of local community members, who expressed their sense that the neighborhood was lacking in green areas where local residents could experience nature first-hand. Implicit in this desire was the belief that greenspace would provide relief from the polluted and stale air of the urban environment, giving local people a chance to develop an ecological and aesthetic understanding of their relationship with the earth, and offering people the opportunity to relax and unwind away from the noisy streets.

Creating the ARROW garden also offered an opportunity to connect with other people. The garden, which was reclaimed from an abandoned city lot piled with unsightly junk, demanded close teamwork and cooperation among members of the community. Remembering the early days, Sandra reminisces, “We all knew each other and we would have work days where people would turn out. All the kids would turn out and we’d give them shovels and it was just a very tight and pleasurable thing when we had that much greenspace and also greenspace that was everybody’s.” For Sandra this experience of working together connects directly to possibilities for building not only a safer neighborhood, but a safer world, “I think learning to work side by side with someone who isn’t like you is just key to world peace, but it’s such a small step that I think it gets overlooked.” Clearly, connecting a community garden to the prospects for world peace is a leap, and one that is not easily communicated to policymakers. Reflecting on citywide battle over preserving community gardens that the city wants to develop for other purposes,

Sandra muses, “I think it is common that you don’t really realize the benefit, the overall benefit of greenspace, over these flashier, more immediate improvements.”

Although waning support of city officials would seem to suggest otherwise, the value of greenspace to urban communities is in fact well documented. As Father Jim O’ Donnell, who created one of the principal urban gardens in *A Place to Grow* writes, “The corner where we have that park called Oasis of Peace was filled with rocks and glass and junk. Somehow it reflected the neighborhood, and it reflected how people felt. Now it’s one little place that says, it’s beautiful, and everything isn’t junk down here, and we’re not all junk – we’re not all to be thrown away.” (IX) Several of O’Donnell’s gardeners reflect on how the community garden has increased their sense of community and served as an antidote to urban chaos and disintegration. Gustina Nicholas comments, “We get to know each other, to laugh and talk and joke... .We don’t have to be at each other’s houses every day, but we have to have this closeness” (19).

Class and Ethnic Differences in the Garden

In spite of ARROW’s success in building ties within the community, there remains, Sandra argues, something of a disconnect between the people who use the garden and those who use the community center and playground. The immediate neighborhood, a part of Astoria known as Dutch Kills, has significant Latino (largely Puerto Rican) and Bangladeshi populations, neither of which has been strongly represented in the vegetable garden. Sandra lives a couple of miles away in a relatively affluent and whiter part of Queens. Joan identifies herself strongly as working class (a fact that figures heavily, along with the fact that she married into the Latino community, in the excellent rapport she has built with community center users), but she does not live in the immediate neighborhood, commuting from her home in Woodhaven to the

ARROW site. Apart from Gloria, a Chilean woman who lives in a nearby apartment building¹, the other two active ARROW gardeners I met were white and middle class.

Sandra reports that efforts have been made to bridge the gap, creating posters in English and Spanish in the hope of attracting people who bring their children to the Mommy and Me group and Capoeira classes in the community center. But, “those women certainly didn’t have time to start up gardening. If they weren’t working another job at night, you know, it was always a division, and you always got the idea that the gardening was very much something that people who had some leisure could do, not that people working all the time would do.” Apart from issues of cultural barriers and time, Sandra feels that this failure to connect to the local community has something to do with the size of the plots available, and the sense that there is really no economic benefit to gardening at ARROW, “Certainly that plot wasn’t big enough to supplement any sort of real need for food so there was no huge motivation for them. I mean, I think if it had been a large area and they could have shared the work, I think we could have had a bigger presence because they could have fed themselves.”

Sandra’s concern over the failure of the ARROW garden to connect with local people is well founded and it will remain to be seen whether over time the Latino and Bangladeshi populations become more actively involved. Clearly, as documented in books like *A Place to Grow*, urban gardening is of particular benefit to poor and working class communities, and there are many examples of highly successful projects with full participation from communities similar to that in which ARROW is located. Countries such as Great Britain, where there is a strong tradition of working class gardening on public land also provide strong evidence of the viability

¹ In spite of many attempts to set up a longer interview, Gloria was repeatedly unavailable. I arranged to meet her on a Saturday morning but she did not show up, and I also arranged a phone interview with three-way calling so that my Dominican friend could translate but Gloria said she was sick and could not do it. I am not certain whether this lack of availability was due to real sickness or evidence of the cultural disconnect of which Sandra had spoken, which made Gloria uneasy about being interviewed.

of gardening even in communities where time-scarcity and overwork is a serious problem. Britain's coalminers have a strong tradition as spectacular gardeners, their allotments (a British term for a community garden plot) serving as outlets for creativity and humanity stifled by the pit. Even farm laborers, according to Flora Thompson, would spend the remaining daylight hours after a ten-hour shift, working on their personal plots as a matter of enjoyment as much as subsistence, "The energy they brought to their gardening after a hard day's work in the fields was marvelous," she notes, "most of the men sang as they dug or hoed" (62).

Certainly, many of the new immigrants in the neighborhood come from agricultural backgrounds and doubtless know the difference in quality between homegrown and shop-bought vegetables. Gloria, the Chilean woman from the nearby building, told me that she grew up farming in Chile and remembers in particular the flavor of the tomatoes and different kinds of peppers that her family grew. She grows similar plants in her ARROW plot and it clearly provides a connection to her agricultural heritage that helps to enrich and introduce balance into her life in the city. Sandra's sense is that a latent need exists among many local people but that they are too caught up in the grind of trying to survive in New York City to be able to explore something like gardening, where the rewards are not immediate and where the smallness of the plot makes one's harvest of ornamental rather practical food value. She hopes that through small changes in how the garden is organized, some of these barriers can be broken down.

Gardening for Your Life

For those who are able to participate, gardening establishes a connection between creative labor and food that completely bypasses the familiar means by which most city people survive. It is common to hear a gardener talk as if they are in on a tremendous secret – answers to the child's question, "You mean you can eat this?" unravel and challenge a whole world of

assumptions about our system of economic production, the way we meet our basic needs, and the way life in a city is organized. Thinking of her garden at home, Joan says, “I have tomatoes, I have green peppers, cucumbers, oregano, parsley, and also we have two different types of figs, and eggplants.” The words are uttered not like a grocery list but weightily, with pauses, as each vegetable is conjured in the imagination and experienced in the fullness of the labor that has gone into it.

Derek Jarman, wondering if he will live to see his roses bloom, connects to the herbs and plants he has worked with in a similarly intimate way that seems to shield him from his illness and from the hectic demands of his work outside the garden. Steeped in old herbal texts that detail the magical curative properties of common plants such as sage and dill, he becomes connected as a gardener with medieval understanding of the earth and its powers. His evocative lists of plant names, “cinquefoil, sedum, bacon-and-eggs, meliot, thistle, scarlet pimpernel, willow herb...toadflax, agrimony, dog rose, curled dock, Nottingham catchfly” (301), are ultimately superceded by lists of the toxic AIDS medications he must take to battle his illness, “AZT, Ritalin, Pyroxidine, Methamphetamine, Folic Acid, Triludan, Sulphadiazine, Carbamazepine” (313), announcing that he is close to the end.

Although most are not in as dire a situation as Jarman, many urban gardeners think of their gardening as a shield against the onslaught both of time, which in the city always seems to go too fast, and everyday worries about making a living, looking after families, staying healthy, and achieving personal goals. Unlike Tom and Barbara Good, in *The Good Life*, none of the ARROW members sees self-sufficiency as a viable goal for themselves. Sandra loves her work as a commercial artist and Joan thrives on her work at the community center; both love the intensity of New York life and do not desire to retreat into a pastoral existence. However, the

pride with which they talk about the things they grow expresses a rich, intimate connection to life that circumvents the commodified demands on time and energy that too often get in the way. As Sandra notes, “In the workplace you don’t have that downtime and I think you’re always goal-oriented. I think that in a lot of jobs you’re always watching your back in terms of how much you can say or the stories you can tell because you don’t want it to get around the office. I think [gardening] is a whole different way of being.”

Conclusion

ARROW has struggled to maintain interest in the vegetable garden. Unlike the thriving community center next door, the garden has very few active members and has largely failed to make inroads into the local ethnic communities. However, before writing off the garden as an unpopular and worthless venture (something that has been threatened by Parks authorities if the garden does not pick up in the coming year), it is necessary to take a step back and consider why people, especially people in cities, might feel the need to garden even if they are not present and active at the moment. The testimony of Sandra and Joan, who remain deeply committed to the garden in spite of their awareness of conflicting demands on the ARROW space, gives voice to the sense of pleasure, relaxation, interconnectedness, and balance that even a tiny plot of earth can offer. These feelings are mirrored and supported by the grass roots experiences of the community gardeners in *A Place to Grow*. They are also backed in the realm of culture, whether in the stand of Tom and Barbara against the onslaught of 1970s materialism or the learned writings of Derek Jarman, from his cottage garden outpost in the shadow of the Dungeness nuclear power station.

The persistence of the urge to garden in the built-up environment remains a conundrum for policymakers who must see past the seemingly anomalous or vestigial position of community

gardens in amongst urban infrastructure and understand how, in a relatively low-income, time-scarce community, underuse of a resource such as the ARROW vegetable garden does not necessarily signify lack of interest or need. While ARROW may not currently bring out gardeners in droves from the nearby apartment buildings, its small plots allow those who are able to garden and those who pass by to dream of the possibility of a less hectic life. As Joan comments on her work in the garden, “You might think people would look down their nose because you’re covered in dirt and your hair’s all standing up, but actually the contrary is true – they don’t. They mightn’t understand it but they seem to a certain degree to appreciate what you’re doing.”

References

Don, Monty and Sarah Don. The Jewel Garden. London: Hooder & Stoughton. 2004.

Hassler, David and Lynn Gregor, Eds. A Place to Grow: Voices and Images of Urban Gardeners. Ohio: The Pilgrim Press. 1998.

Jarman, Derek. Modern Nature. New York: Overlook Press. 1994.

Thompson, Flora. Lark Rise to Candleford. Middlesex: Penguin Books. 1984.

The Good Life, Plot Summary. Available from:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/guide/articles/g/goodlifethe_7772855.shtml