

A narrow, rubble-strewn lot in South Philadelphia has been transformed into a vibrant neighborhood green space.

PRIDE PRESERVATION

by LINI S. KADABA
photographs by ROB CARDILLO

Nearly three decades have passed, but LaTonya Pyatt still remembers the sound when the front of the row house across the street from hers collapsed in the middle of the night. “It was horrific, like a tornado,” says the 55-year-old resident of South Philadelphia’s Point Breeze neighborhood. “Several people were hurt. I remember the turmoil.”

But that calamity had a silver lining—or, more accurately, a multihued, technicolor lining that is both ornamental and edible. At 1329 South 15th Street, on the long, narrow vacant lot left after the collapsed house was cleared, a beautiful garden now grows.

The colorful mural and flowerbed for pollinators welcome members and passersby into the 15th Street Garden.



The 15th Street Garden, as the neighbors call it, announces itself to summer passersby with a colorful pollinator garden up front that complements a bold mural of a lush park on the wall of a neighboring house. In the middle of the lot, six edible beds include tomatoes, sweet potatoes, and peppers—the hotter the better, according to Pyatt’s taste—as well as blueberry and raspberry bushes and more unusual produce such as ginger and cucamelons (*Melothria scabra*). In the back is an orchard from which figs, serviceberries, pawpaws, plums, and elderberries can be harvested when the fruits are in season.

PROTECTED GROUND

“The garden is a very peaceful place,” Pyatt says. “And given how it started, we feel like the land is sacred.” But all the sweat and love that went into the creation of this green oasis could have gone for naught if not for the Neighborhood Gardens Trust (NGT), a PHS-affiliated organization.

Founded in 1986 as the Neighborhood Gardens Association, NGT is an urban land conservation organization that to date has permanently protected 50 community gardens and other shared open spaces in Philadelphia. Ranging from single lots to a 3.7-acre site, the aggregated area held by the trust is more than 13 acres, on which 1,500 people actively garden.



Bob Jobin of the Neighborhood Gardens Trust (in back) joined gardeners (from right) Charmaine Gibson, LaTonya Pyatt, Gibson’s granddaughters (Reya and Reina), Kyonne Isaac, and Laura Naden for a fall cleanup.

According to Jenny Greenberg, NGT executive director, another 20 gardens are in the preservation pipeline. In 2019, Philadelphia City Council agreed to protect the 15th Street Garden, but the actual transfer of the property’s title to NGT—a lengthy process that the pandemic has extended even more—has not yet occurred. The trust only gets involved with established community gardens supported by a robust group of neighbors, Greenberg explains. “We’re looking for permanent preservation,” she says, “so we need to make sure that a garden’s maintenance is not dependent on any individual caretaker.”

The 15th Street Garden has had an up-and-down history since it began to take root in 1998, a few years after the house collapse. Its originators were members of the Pyatt family: LaTonya’s parents, Richard and Annie Mae, along with her sister and brother-in-law, Lorie and Arthur Miles. With help from several neighbors, they planted vegetable beds and built a patio, pathways, and a gazebo. The garden thrived for about 10 years, until Richard was diagnosed with cancer and the family’s focus turned to his care. He died in 2009, and over the next several years, the plot became overgrown with weeds.

Bob Jobin, a Point Breeze resident who remembered the garden’s glory days, noticed the neglect and started asking neighbors about it. He eventually connected with LaTonya Pyatt, who had returned to the family homestead to care for her aging mother. In 2015, she and Jobin worked with other neighbors and began reviving the garden, but meanwhile the neighborhood had begun to gentrify. At one point, word on the block was that a developer was eyeing the garden for a parking lot.

GARDEN SUPPORTS

PHS has a long history of aiding community gardeners in our region, and today that support is stronger than ever. Here are a few of the valuable resources PHS provides.

TRAINING The Garden Tenders program is a focused seminar on the process of organizing and maintaining a community garden. Workshops on a wide range of topics teach gardeners the keys to success, with an emphasis on eco-friendly methods.

PLANTS Each year, PHS distributes hundreds of thousands of seedlings for planting in community gardens that participate in the PHS Harvest program.

SUPPLIES Participating community gardens can also receive compost, mulch, lumber, fencing, and other essentials from PHS.

TOOLS AND GEAR Community gardeners can borrow power and hand tools and many other handy items, including generators, public-address systems, and more. The items can be reserved online and are available for pickup at the PHS McLean Urban Agriculture Tool Library on Glenwood Avenue in Philadelphia.

For more details on all the ways PHS helps community gardeners, go to PHSonline.org/community-gardens-network.



Speckled butter bean



'White Marseilles' fig

“The garden is a very peaceful place.”



Yellow turmeric



Frost aster



“It’s a passion of mine to see these spaces maintained.” —Bob Jobin

“It’s a passion of mine to see these spaces maintained,” says the 38-year-old Jobin, a master gardener and NGT board member who works for an education nonprofit. “I think in a neighborhood like South Philadelphia, where there’s extensive concrete, you need to preserve these precious green spaces.” Adds Greenberg: “That neighborhood is seeing every parcel of vacant land that’s not preserved being filled in with housing. If NGT doesn’t acquire the garden, it will be lost to development.”

In many ways, the 15th Street Garden is a continuation of Point Breeze’s storied horticultural history. In the 1980s, community leaders in the neighborhood turned dozens of trash-strewn vacant lots into community green spaces as part

of PHS’s “Greene Countrie Towne” program, which was working to realize William Penn’s founding vision for Philadelphia. And Point Breeze was one of the first locales where NGT helped preserve garden spaces, ultimately securing seven.

Parcel by parcel, NGT is chipping away at the estimated 200 gardens in the city that could potentially be bought and built upon. In some cases, community-based organizations are also trying to acquire the land, and NGT provides technical support. The Philadelphia Land Bank, a public agency established in 2013, helps streamline the acquisition and productive reuse of vacant lands. In 2016, NGT (with support from PHS and the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources) completed

a garden acquisition study that identified as a priority the preservation of gardens in low-to-moderate-income neighborhoods that lacked access to both healthy food and open spaces and were blighted with vacant lots.

The trust, with an annual operating budget of \$500,000, is on track to reach its goal of 70 permanently preserved gardens in two to three years. The work is vital: Studies show that communities with more green space experience benefits such as a decrease in depression among residents, an increase in public safety, and improved access to healthy food when compared to communities with

less green space. “These benefits are lost when gardens are lost,” Greenberg says.

NGT isn’t interested in just managing open land until a builder comes, she adds. “Having permanently preserved, community-driven green spaces is part of creating a healthy, sustainable, equitable city.” (Get more info at ngtrust.org.)

FOOD AND FULFILLMENT

These days, the 15th Street Garden is lush and lovely, a place that nourishes both bodies and souls. LaTonya Pyatt, Bob Jobin, and Kyonne Isaac are the garden’s leaders, and with the pandemic under control, they hope to partner with a nearby senior center and open the patch to visitors. “All of us watch a lot of YouTube videos and read a lot of stuff to up our gardening game,” Pyatt says. They also seek grants, organize fundraisers, and donate from their own pockets to cover costs.

Heirloom tomatoes thrive here, and most are not red, Pyatt notes, pointing out a few favorites in varied hues: ‘Dr. Wyche’s Yellow’, ‘Black Beauty’, ‘Blue Beauty’, and the multicolored ‘Berkeley Tie-Dye’. “I cannot live without the tomatoes,” Pyatt says. “I eat tomato sandwiches every day in the summer.” Peppers also prosper, and this year the crop will include ‘Lemon Spice’ and ‘Sugar Rush Peach’ chiles. Artichokes were planted last year, and sweet potatoes will be a feature again this year.

Besides eating the fruits of their labor, the gardeners enjoy tending the plants. “I’m so grateful for the garden,” says Charmaine Gibson, 61, a retired paralegal who often shares her harvest with neighbors and her church. “I enjoy the fellowship; it’s like therapy for me.”

When Gibson’s two granddaughters come to visit, they always ask, “Mom-Mom, are we going to the garden today?” Reina, 8, and Reya, 6, help their mom-mom pick green beans and peppers, and Reina has helped dig holes for cabbage and garlic starts.

“The younger one,” Gibson says with a laugh, “wasn’t interested in getting her hands dirty.” 🌱

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Reina (left) visits the garden with her grandmother and enjoys picking sweet-flavored ‘Habanada’ peppers. Pyatt (opposite page) installs a solar light on a fence post in the shade of a mature golden-rain tree (*Koelreuteria paniculata*).