



SAVING SPACES

Community gardens need help to survive growing real estate pressures.

by SCOTT MEYER *photographs by* ROB CARDILLO

A VACANT LOT FILLED WITH REFUSE MAY LOOK LIKE AN EYESORE to most of us, but community gardeners see land that can be cultivated and green spaces where neighbors can spend time together. In many sections of Philadelphia, neighbors have joined forces to transform hundreds of unused lots into garden plots that are shared among the people who work them and the communities around them.

Philadelphia has been recognized as a national leader in community gardening since the 1970s, thanks in part to the pioneering work of PHS's Philadelphia Green program. The Chester Avenue Community Garden, for example, was established in 1985 on a lot where a demolished apartment building had been. "We called the neighborhood West Philadelphia back then. No one knew it as 'University City' like they do now," says Guina Hammond, one of the garden's founding members. Today, the land where people from the surrounding neighborhood raise food for themselves and spend time outdoors together is becoming increasingly valuable as real estate.

For many gardens across the city, including some that have been maintained for as long as Chester Avenue has, fast-rising property values threaten their survival. All the years of hard

Emerald Street Community Farm in the East Kensington neighborhood was founded in 2008 and preserved in 2019. It's a communal growing space, so the plots and the harvest are all shared with the gardeners and the community.



Summer Winter Community Garden (top left) came under the NGT umbrella in 2006. The first seeds were planted at Aspen Farms (above left) in 1975, but the gardeners gained control of the land only in 2003. Five Loaves Two Fish Garden (above right) started in 2014 and is now protected.



The Bouvier Community Garden in the Point Breeze neighborhood (left) was preserved in 1994. PHS helped to set up the Strawberry Mansion Green Resource Center (above) in 2013, and NGT has a long-term lease on the land. The Pulaski Zeralda Garden (right) added space in 2023.



work and time spent in establishing and maintaining a garden can be lost when the land's value increases enough to make it attractive to developers, builders, and other investors. The Neighborhood Gardens Trust, a partner of PHS, has been helping to preserve and protect community gardens since the 1980s. "Redevelopment has been a challenge for years," says Jenny Greenberg, NGT executive director. "Land speculation is making the situation even worse in some areas of the city."

CHANGING NEIGHBORHOODS

The 4700 block of Chester Avenue is close to the campuses of the University of Pennsylvania and Drexel University, and as their footprints have grown, the dynamics in the neighborhood have shifted. "Back when we started the garden, there was disinvestment in this area. Today there is a lot of investment," says Hammond, who is a member of the NGT board of directors and PHS program manager of public gardens and landscapes. "Since the universities began encouraging faculty and staff to live in West Philadelphia and providing them with housing support, land became more valuable and less available."

The 15,600 square feet of space in the Chester Avenue Community Garden has 35 individual plots that may be reserved by people in the neighborhood. The space also includes Asian pears, plums, currants, and bush cherries, all of which need several seasons or more to become established and start producing fruit.

Fortunately, Chester Avenue is one of the 52 community gardens in Philadelphia that have been preserved through the work of NGT. These gardens range in size from single lots to 3.7 acres, and they include food gardens, ornamental gardens, and other types of shared green spaces. NGT works with the gardeners, the property owners and developers, and city government to acquire the land and hold it for the community.

"The consistent issue with vacant land in the city is that people who pour their blood, sweat, and tears into improving it, often for many years, have no site control or assurance for the future," Greenberg says. "We work to get ownership or a long-term lease for the garden."

OUTSIDE THREATS

The Pulaski Zeralda Garden in the city's Germantown section was started in 1986 on two empty lots on Pulaski Avenue, totaling 9,885 square feet. The garden has both individual plots and space to grow for the community. Each year, the gardeners donate hundreds of pounds of produce through the PHS City Harvest program to nearby food pantries, such as those at Canaan Baptist and Enon Tabernacle Baptist churches. Crossroads Women's Center has its own plot in the garden and distributes the food to its clients.

In 2015, NGT took ownership of the land, and the gardeners were able to continue planning for the future. In fall 2023, however, they learned that a developer had bought the neighboring lot, which had been vacant and untended for many years. Not only were the gardeners' long-held hopes of expanding their space

dashed, but they also found out the developer was seeking a zoning variance to build an eight-unit apartment building on the site.

Studies commissioned by NGT showed the shade created by the apartment building would make it impossible to grow tomatoes, cucumbers, and other summer crops. With the help of a local attorney, NGT and the gardeners launched a campaign to raise awareness in the neighborhood about the threat to the garden. Residents rallied at the local zoning meetings. "There was an outpouring of community support for the garden, and opposition to the variance," Greenberg says. "When it was clear that the developer was not going to get the community's support for the project, he ultimately agreed to sell the lot to NGT." On December 20, 2023, NGT took ownership of the parcel, using contributions from donors and a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.



CITY PLANNING

Philadelphia's history of urban farming and community gardens dates back to at least 1897, when a parcel at 56th Street and Haverford Avenue was divided into small garden plots by the Philadelphia Vacant Lot Cultivation Association. In 2023, Philadelphia Parks and Recreation released *Growing from the Root*, Philadelphia's first comprehensive urban agriculture plan.

The 10-year road map, produced with input from PHS and many other stakeholders, aims to identify the "systems, structures, resources, and policies necessary to sustain and grow urban agriculture in Philadelphia and nurture a more just local food system," according to the report's introductory text.

About 450 "known active urban agricultural spaces" were identified throughout the city, totaling around 130 acres of growing space. The plan recommends increasing the number of city-owned parcels that are preserved each year and having city agencies work to acquire garden spaces before they are sold through sheriff's sales.

Public and private support for urban food growers will be a big step forward in the PHS mission to increase access to fresh food and advance the health and well-being of the Greater Philadelphia region.

For all the details, go to phila.gov/documents/philadelphias-urban-agriculture-plan.

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Seven years after neighbors joined together to clear and plant the Old Tennis Court Farm in Germantown, the owner of the land announced plans to sell it, and the gardens were closed. They reopened two years later as a result of a concerted effort by the community, NGT, and other groups to secure the property.

MORE THAN DEEDS

Once ownership of the land has been secured, gardens face a new set of challenges and responsibilities. “We’re now the property owners, so we shoulder the liability and insurance coverage,” Greenberg says. “We’re not the garden managers—community gardeners are self-organized volunteers—but there are maintenance issues we take care of. A few weeks ago, for example, a tree from one of our gardens fell down in a storm and hit a house. We worked with the homeowner and an arborist to carefully remove the tree to prevent any damage.” NGT also helps with getting water lines installed in community gardens.

Raising funds through donations and grants can pose problems for unincorporated groups of community gardeners. NGT provides structure and support for those efforts. For instance, NGT received a \$23,586 grant in 2023 from the Philadelphia Committee of the Garden Club of America to oversee a renovation of the Chester Avenue Community Garden in partnership with the gardeners and PHS. The funds are currently being used to update and renovate the garden and make it more accessible to all people.

The gardens that NGT works with must meet a few basic criteria. They need to be continuously active for a minimum of three growing seasons, have a robust group of reliable volunteers, and have support from the nearby community. Ties to civic groups or other community institutions, such as churches and schools, are preferred. “We focus our efforts in historically disinvested areas—that is, low-to-moderate-income neighborhoods,” Greenberg says.

PERFECT PARTNERS

NGT is a small operation, with just three full-time people on staff, but its impact is enhanced because it is a partner of PHS. It has space in the PHS headquarters and relies on PHS to help the community gardens with a wide range of technical and logistical support.

“The partnership between PHS and NGT works so well because NGT focuses on the land issues, including advocating for the gardeners with the city,” says Justin Trezza, PHS director of community garden programs. “Our efforts are on the human side, working with the gardeners to make sure they have what they need to succeed.”

PHS provides training for community gardeners through its year-round schedule of workshops. Community gardens participating in the City Harvest program are eligible to receive vegetable seedlings grown by PHS, as well as supplies such as compost and bed-building lumber. PHS also maintains two tool libraries from which community gardeners can borrow. When contractors are needed to remove fallen trees or to do other work beyond the gardeners’ capacity, PHS handles the process of hiring and managing them. “It’s really a hand-in-glove relationship with NGT and PHS,” Trezza says.

The future of community gardens depends on all kinds of support. “A community garden is an asset to its neighborhood, an amenity that improves the quality of life in many ways,” Greenberg explains. “New investment should not be at the expense of the people who have been living there and making the effort to improve it.”

Learn more about the Neighborhood Gardens Trust at ngtrust.org. See all about the PHS programs for community gardeners at PHSonline.org/programs/community-gardens.