



BRONX AND MANHATTAN LAND TRUSTS

Doña Paula Díaz, one of the New York gardeners, holds the fruits (or veggies) of her labors.

## GARDENS OF life

Every day gardener Michael Lancaster walks to the Five Star Garden in Harlem. He picks up his tools and begins the work he enjoys so much that he volunteers in this community garden 10 to 20 hours a week. When asked what grows in his garden, Michael says, “We grow people!”

When you think of land conservation, you probably don't picture the high-rises, concrete and asphalt of the Bronx or Manhattan. Yet it is in this environment, defined by the manmade, that preserving space to keep people connected to nature and the land is all the more imperative.

As the director of the Bronx and Manhattan Land Trusts we work to preserve and steward 32 lush member gardens in some of the most densely

summer heat waves. Kids are putting their hands in dirt, touching worms and watching tiny seeds become plants—exploring their natural environment often for the first time—all close to home. Neighbors are socializing on warm nights, forming bonds. As people work side-by-side creating beauty on their

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populated neighborhoods in New York City. The two land trusts were created a decade ago to steward these sites in the wake of the city's attempt to demolish the gardens for development. Gardener-established and governed, with a shared history and mission, the land trusts work together to improve, preserve, sustain and promote community-managed open spaces in their boroughs and citywide for the benefit of all residents.

In these gardens, seniors are able to find a calm, quiet respite and are not dangerously shut-in during

block, they begin to feel a sense of pride in their communities—a pride that has all-too-often drained away in the wake of failed urban renewal and economic blight.

**“When you grow a tomato plant and you take care of it, it gives back to you by giving you more tomatoes. It inspires me to continue gardening. We gave a garden to the community and**

**now the community wants to give back to the environment. People around here say when you walk into the garden, you feel like you're in paradise.”**

These are the words of a Bronx gardener whose garden was recently transformed. Once an eyesore with limited access, it is now a thriving community garden where active members grow food, welcome visitors and host neighborhood events. Our efforts at the Bronx and Manhattan Land Trusts are focused on providing for such renovations, as well as training, technical assistance and community organizing assistance.

With the support and assistance of the Land Trust Alliance, soon our trusts will enter a new chapter: the ownership of their gardens. Gardeners who removed debris from garbage-strewn lots and worked so diligently to save them will actually own them, achieving a level of self-determination all too rare in low-income neighborhoods across the nation.

Ours will, I believe, be a unique and exciting model of environmental justice and urban land stewardship; one we hope will be a positive step for urban land management throughout the country.

Back in the garden oases, residents from diverse backgrounds are working the land together, turning vacant lots green. Our gardeners are growing hundreds of pounds of fresh produce—collard greens, eggplant and jalapeños, corn, squash and beans, figs, peaches and raspberries—as well as verdant ornamental shrubs and flowers. But beyond this bounty, they are growing something even more vital: a sense of community. 🌱

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