

ECOTIPPING POINTS VIDEO SCRIPT

NEW YORK CITY'S COMMUNITY GARDENS

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New York City is famous the world over for its grandeur. It represents to many the promise of America, drawing millions of visitors each year. However, alongside the splendor, there has also been blight – New York's slums. It is here that abandoned buildings and vacant lots have become breeding grounds for gangs and drug dealers. With notorious crime rates and nearly uninhabitable conditions, it has sometimes been difficult to imagine that these neighborhoods ever showed vitality or growth. This was particularly so for the Bowery, an iconic historical area in the heart of Manhattan's Lower East Side.

Stepping back to the 1700s, the Bowery was originally an agricultural district south of the emerging downtown. A nearby lake, known as Collect Pond, was a favorite fishing spot, and the Bowery was particularly notable for its Teawater Garden resort, which took its name from a local freshwater spring. At that time, people equated walking through the neighborhood to taking a stroll through a beautiful garden.

Unfortunately, the Bowery began to decline around the end of the 1700s. Pollution was accumulating as local manufacturers increased production and waste. Collect Pond became so polluted by breweries and slaughterhouses that the city deemed it unsanitary and filled it in. The farms that once spread for miles were covered over by city streets, and the population exploded. However, this was not the end. By the late 1800s, after the city built an elevated railroad along both sides of Bowery Street, the buildings became trash dumps and flophouses, and crime flourished.

During the 1960s and early 1970s, New York City's government responded to a financial crisis by cutting services to the Bowery. Public safety deteriorated as one police station and fire station after another was closed. People moved out, leaving entire buildings vacant. Many landlords stopped maintaining their properties, which then reverted to the city when taxes were left unpaid. The downward spiral seemed impossible to escape.

However, the tide began to turn in the spring of 1973 – a change triggered by a small event involving Liz Christy at a vacant lot on the northeast corner of Bowery and East Houston. Christy was a recent resident of the Bowery, an artist who saw the run-down neighborhood as a living canvas. The lot was piled ten feet high with trash. One day Christy saw a child playing in an abandoned refrigerator there, and she complained to the child's mother that it wasn't safe. The mother responded that Christy should do something about it herself if she was so concerned. Within weeks, Christy assembled her friends, largely college students who had recently moved into the neighborhood, and they began to clean up the lot.

The volunteers spent the next three months hauling trash, leveling the gravel underneath, and trucking in fresh soil. Then, using horse manure from a nearby mounted police station as fertilizer, they made sixty raised garden beds, and began planting. The neighbors, mostly Hispanic and African-American, were initially skeptical of these white kids in hippie clothes, but as they saw the Bowery Houston Community Farm Garden take shape, they could not resist pitching in. Within a few months, as they produced armloads of tomatoes and cucumbers, the gardeners were able to see, and eat, the fruits of their labor.

The city government reacted to these interlopers on city property by moving to shut them down. However, stories in New York's *Daily News* mobilized so much public sentiment in support of the gardeners – who called themselves the “Green Guerillas” – that the city decided to lease the lot to them for just a dollar a year.

Soon Christy found herself working full-time consulting with other neighborhood groups to set up gardens. And by 1978, she was collaborating with a city Parks Department program called Green Thumb, which offered plants, tools, and horticultural advice to community gardeners. Each garden was governed by the gardeners themselves, creating a sense of group ownership and responsibility. They tailored each garden to fit the needs and unique character of the surrounding neighborhood. Just as biodiversity makes an ecosystem stronger, the gardens benefited from the gardeners' diversity of ages, occupational and ethnic backgrounds, skills, and ideas.

The members of each garden formulated simple but firm rules. Every gardener was assigned a plot, instilling a sense of personal ownership, and they were required to maintain an active garden on the plot. Neglected plots were assigned to someone else. Additional rules concerned respect for other people's plots. After a warning, anyone who continued to be disruptive was expelled.

A survey by Green Thumb found the gardeners were growing over \$1 million worth of produce each year upon 200 acres of land. And 75 percent of the garden groups were able to give some of their harvest to food banks and hungry neighbors.

But the gardens offered much more than food. They provided islands of shade and cooling in the long, hot Manhattan summers. A single acre could absorb up to two tons of sulfur dioxide, a major threat to people's respiratory health and the main component of acid rain. The diversity of crops, flowers, shrubs, and trees created habitats for a variety of birds, insects, and other wildlife. One beekeeper alone was able to produce over 100 pounds of honey a year.

And most important, the once blighted vacant lots were transformed into vibrant, attractive community gathering spaces. The green space reduced stress among local residents, boosting both mental and physical health. Weddings, birthdays, cookouts, music fests, dramas, and political rallies became regular social events in the gardens, which also hosted science lessons for school children. The result was community pride, stronger ties among neighbors, and a shared mentality that no longer tolerated shabbiness and crime.

Each urban oasis inspired other neighborhoods to follow its example. As one garden led to another, the progression of urban decay began to slow, and finally reverse. People started moving into formerly depressed neighborhoods, landlords put more into maintaining their buildings, local

businesses returned, the city gained tax revenue, and government services improved. At the height of the movement, in the late 1980s, the city hosted more than 800 homegrown gardens.

And the concept spread. The U.S. Department of Agriculture began to realize what an innovative idea this was, and supported the growth of urban gardens in 22 additional cities across the country. Visitors to New York from other cities, and other parts of the world, learned how to start community gardens, taking the information – and inspiration – back home.

Then came a setback. The very success of New York City's community gardens became a threat to their existence. As neighborhoods with gardens became more desirable, city officials began to eye the garden lots to sell for private development. At first, in the late 1980s, a few of the gardens were leveled for the development of low-income housing, but by 1994, when Rudolph Giuliani was mayor, a full-scale plague of bulldozers descended upon the gardens. Rather than supporting housing for the poor, the lots were sold to upscale real estate developers. The plan was gentrification.

But Giuliani had miscalculated. He underestimated the deep roots that the gardens had established in New Yorkers' hearts. And he unwittingly united the gardeners by threatening all of them at the same time. Gardeners across the city formed the New York Garden Preservation Coalition, and the battle was on. While some took to the streets and spoke to the media, others joined the battle in the courtroom with help from state Attorney General Eliot Spitzer. In the end, Giuliani's successor came to the negotiating table, and some 600 gardens were saved.

What was novel about this generation of green spaces was that they were not planned by City Hall, but rather sprang up, literally, from the streets. Desperate neighbors, fed up with waiting for the city's help, launched their own urban back-to-the-land movement. Residents revitalized their neighborhoods, reclaiming them from decay. The gardens trained a generation of activists and spawned other environmental projects.

This thirty-five-year saga is an example of an EcoTipping Point, demonstrating how positive action that truly connects to people's lives can set in motion dramatic changes for the better. The Green Guerillas interrupted a catastrophic vicious cycle. They took one part of their urban environment – a vacant lot – and morphed it from an eyesore to an oasis that offered people an opportunity to do things for themselves. Instead of moving out, people started moving back in. As the upward spiral gained momentum, it overpowered the forces that were driving decline, and ultimately, the community and its urban environment were functioning sustainably together.

In a time when too many systems are tipping the wrong way, New York's success challenges our fear that ecological dilemmas are too big, too costly, and too complicated to solve. EcoTipping points show that it is not only possible to live in harmony with our environment, it is achievable.

Details of New York City's community gardens story and dozens of other environmental success stories can be seen at the EcoTipping Points website: www.ecotippingpoints.org.