
NYACK COMMUNITY GARDEN

October-November 2018

The Nyack Community Garden's History



Founder Barbara Gilman and her son in the Garden. Newspaper clipping from Journal News, Collection of Nyack Public Library.

The Nyack Community Garden is very much a part of the national community garden movement in the 1970's described in our July-August 2018 newsletter. Around 1974-75 the land along Franklin Street between Depew and Hudson was vacant and considered undevelopable. Local people lead by Barbara Gilman and including Dan Rogers and Farrell Freeman, who worked on the effort as part of his Cooperative Extension Master Gardener volunteer commitment, pushed for a community garden on the site.

In addition to the typical benefits to the community of a garden, the Nyack one was also viewed as a means of promoting community within Nyack's diverse community and as a complement to the adjacent housing being constructed by the Robert Martin Company. The Robert Martin Company agreed and offered the space for a community garden beginning the long and productive sponsorship of the Nyack Community Garden by the real estate investment, development and management firm. It is not exactly clear when the first plot was planted at our garden.

1976 may be the date as Barbara Gilman in 1994 thought the photograph of her breaking ground was taken that year. The Nyack Library has a newspaper clipping with a photograph of garden with the date 1979. 1979 seems to be the year when the garden was fully functioning community garden. The process to turn the overgrown vacant lot full of coal dust, cinders, and other remnants of its past railroad facility into the splendid community resource has spanned more than 40 years.

Initially the overgrown vacant lot, with a good crop of bamboo, did not have very many gardeners and plots were located at the north section. Gradually through outreach to the community the number of gardeners increased and the quality of the gardening experience improved. The garden received a boost in 1979 when Grand Union, who was building a store at the Hub shopping center, donated soil from their excavation. This probably was the beginning of the soil improvement that continues to the present when every 4 to 5 years compost is spread on the garden.



Our mid-1980's logo. In 1986 gardeners could purchase a T-shirt with this logo on it.

Plots at the time were 10' x 10' and the fee \$3. Groups involved with the garden included Rockland County Cooperative Extension Service, Nyack High School Interact Club, Rockland Community Action Corporation, and Nyack Rotary. Problems included vandalism of hoses and theft of vegetables. In 1978-79 the Boy Scouts had a plot and in 1980, three and four year-old children at Nyack Head Start had three plots. In the early 1980's Cooperative Extension's Master Gardeners visited the garden regularly to answer questions and give tips.

In the early years the garden was enclosed by a snow fence. In 1983, in 1994 and again in 2000, the gardening community successfully advocated that the property not be developed for other uses. In 1985, the garden had its own "Grow Your Own" logo. In the mid-1980s, the garden contest began. Early categories included largest vegetables and most variety of vegetables in addition to most categories that we have today. Some years the contest was not held.



Early photograph of Garden when surrounded by snow fence. Probably taken around 1980. Collection of Nyack Public Library.

By early 1990's the garden had the general layout that it has today. Annual plot fees were \$10 for a full plot and \$5 for a half plot. The garden welcomed a lot of improvements in the 1990's. In 1989/90 Robert Martin Company put up a chained link fence, which was later replaced by a higher one. The following year the gates were locked to prevent theft and vandalism. Rules at the time included must plant by and must clear plots by dates, control weeds on the path, turn off faucet, no sunflowers or dogs, keep gates closed. Until 1992/3 the Nyack Recreation provided administrative support, mowed the grass, and rototilled. Since then the garden members have handled paperwork and other activities. Over the years the Garden has received support from many businesses and civic organizations in Nyack.

Fortunately, Robert Martin Company, in concert with the Community Housing Management Corporation, continues as our best friend, allowing us to use the land, has the surrounding grass mowed, and provides much other generous support. In 1993-94, Robert Martin Company arranged to have water brought directly to the garden. Previously obtaining water was cumbersome. First, water was transported in buckets, then a hose was run across Franklin Avenue, and then a hose was run over the creek to a spigot outside the Nyack Plaza apartments. In 1994 the Garden hosted ARC workers with disabilities in a community work program.

As early as 1993, gardeners made donations of vegetables to local soup kitchens. Our more formal participation in the Plant a Row for the Hungry began around 6 years ago. Around 1995, our first newsletter was published. In the mid 1990's an annual rummage sale to raise funds coincided with Nyack Street Fairs. In 1996, a new waterline was installed, and our current walk-in shed, so

beautifully painted this summer, was erected. In 1998, the garden had 62 members in 35 full plots and 24 half plots. Today, we have 87 members in 68 plots (30 full and 38 half plots).

Improvements and new programs were added in the 2000's. In 2009, the central walk was handsomely paved. Our website manager Brian Osborne published our first website in April 2010. The colorful sign in the central Franklin flower garden dates to 1912?. In 2016 we added the wooden bench near the shed. In 2017, the flower garden at the corner of Hudson and Franklin became an official Monarch Butterfly Waystation.



Chairperson Sallie Mae Porter at the garden in 2000 after leading a successful effort to preserve the Garden. Journal News, April 15, 2000. After Sallie died in 2002, we had a memorial Sallie's Garden.

Since we have always been a volunteer group, the garden's success is credited to all its members. Special mention has already been given to the key founders. Other standout people are Ward Feirer, chairperson from 1981-92, assisted by secretary/treasurer Edna Matthews. In 1991, Christine Adams was chair, and in 1993-4 Angela Mathews was chair. From 1994-2013, Sallie Mae Porter, Bill Weisgerber, and Zsolt Takacs were our chairs. Since 2014, John Dunnigan and Lynda Grant are our co-chairs.

Information for this article is primarily from the Local History Room in the Nyack Public Library. Many thanks to Carolyn Kent and Mary Ann Goddard, members in the late 1970's, John Dunnigan, Marie Dilluvio, Pauline Heckstall, Dianne Macpherson, Brian Osborne, and Jennifer Rothschild of the

Historical Society of the Nyacks for help and recollections.

If you have memories or facts about our garden that you want to share, please send your comments to nyackcommunitygarden@gmail.com for inclusion in future newsletters.

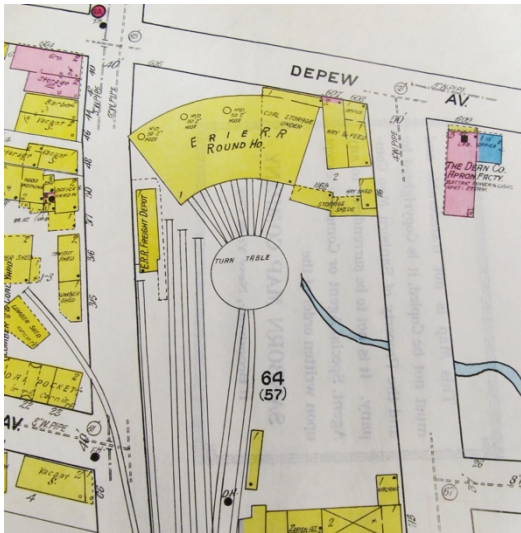
--Robin Brown

History of the Property Before the Nyack Community Garden

Let us go back to the history of the property before our garden. The land was part of the end-of-the-line complex of the spur of the Northern Railroad of New Jersey, which in 1870 linked Nyack with Piermont and the rest of the line. This line later became part of the extensive Erie Railroad network. An 1876 map indicates that the train tracks terminated at a depot located at the southeast corner of Depew and Franklin Avenue and that further south near an unnamed street on the map (Hudson Avenue) was a freight house. This is our garden's location today.



1947 photograph of the tracks and turntable. Collection of Nyack Public Library.



1919 map showing future site of Garden with tracks, freight station, turntable, roundhouse and other end-of-the-line railroad facilities.

There were numerous reconfigurations of the railroad facilities on the site to serve evolving rail functions spanning 95 years. In the late 1880's, after a new passenger station opened about 2 blocks south at a site which is now Franklin Street Park in South Nyack, the garden's site continued to have the freight station and other end-of-the line facilities. By 1891 it had a turntable for turning locomotives. In 1904-05 a new round house (actually an arched segment rather than a full circle) was constructed. It was capable of holding seven engines. This structure is shown on an August 1919 Sanborn Insurance Map with seven sets of tracks leading into it from the turntable. The opening of the New York State Thruway and the Tappan Zee Bridge in 1955 lead to the demise of rail service to Nyack. The last train ran in December 1965.

For those of us who want to know more about this railroad history, the time is now. Soon a new historical sign will be added at the property as part of a project to put up 11 signs along the former railroad bed (rail-trail) with information about the railroad between the Nyack Community Garden site and the Piermont Railroad depot building. Andrew Goodwillie will give an "armchair walking tour" about the research that went into creating the historical information signage along the rail-trail. Presented on Thursday, October 25th at 7pm at the Nyack Library and again on Friday, October 26th at 2pm at the

Valley Cottage Library. Registration required, <http://nyacklibrary.evanced.info/signup/Calendar> and <http://www.vclib.org/>, events calendar. The Historical Society of the Nyacks will host a related exhibit "Tales from the Trail" about the impact of this railroad at its museum in DePew House, lower level Piermont Avenue, on view on Saturdays from 1-4 pm between from October 12 to November 24, 2018.



Engine on the turntable. Photograph by Vincent Lee, probably from early 1960's.

--Robin Brown

Interview with Wilsie Reese

Wilsie Reese has been gardening in the Nyack Community Garden longer than almost anyone else. She couldn't remember exactly what year she started, but she estimated it was around 1993. She was living on Byrd Street at the time and the president of the garden at the time, Mrs. Porter, noticed what lovely flowers she had planted around her house and suggested she join the Community Garden, so she did. (At that time, she remembers John Dunnigan and his mother being involved, too.) There was already a big fenced in space at that time and maybe around 40 gardeners

altogether. The water supply was there, but no shed and no bench and no fencing around Nyack Brook, just to the east of the garden.

Wilsie remembers that everyone had the equivalent of a full plot; there were no ½ plots then, and everyone would start digging in the garden and come across railroad stakes all the time. (The garden is situated on top of what used to be the last stop of the Erie Railroad line.) And lots of rocks! (Somehow rocks grow better than anything else – is this only in Rockland County?). Because there was no fence around Nyack Brook, they would throw all the rocks into the brook.



Back then, you could grow sunflowers and corn, and many did – until they recognized that these plants did so well they would start shading other people's veggies, so they devised the rule prohibiting us from choosing those plants to propagate. Wilsie herself started by growing what she considered to be the essentials - tomatoes, green beans and kale – and always some flowers. She has been growing those essentials ever since, although she has branched out and tried some other veggies over the years. Mostly she planted from seed; only

her tomatoes, she would purchase the starter plants, and her youngest son would help her, especially with the weeding, and still does to this day. She was the proud winner of 2nd prize in one of the contests one of the years.

She told a couple of lovely stories of her experiences in the garden. She was still laughing at the memory of her son helping her harvest in the garden when he was about 15. He had come across the pepper plant that had beautiful, colorful, peppers beaoning to him. Before she could warn him, he popped one into his mouth and was totally shocked – it was an extra hot variety!

Another harvest that was a complete surprise and a complete joy all around was three years ago when, after always shying away from planting watermelons for so many years, she decided to try planting them. She bought 2 plants, and then someone else in the garden offered her 2 more plants. She made space for all 4, mounded them up, and lo and behold, they started growing well, maybe too well, because she had to clip some of the vines to keep them from overwhelming her neighbors' plots and from growing right through the fence. But they yielded 4 absolutely perfect watermelons, which she shared with her daughter.

Her love of gardening began when she was a child (she is now 75) in central Virginia. Her father was the gardener of the vegetables and her mother tended the flowers, which she taught to Wilsie. They had peach and apple trees growing all around and Wilsie came to appreciate gardening and the connection to trees and nature. She moved to Rockland County in 1962 and always loved the hills and trees of this area. She always feels joy and relief when, after a trip into the City, she drives back

over the bridge into the green hills of Rockland County. But to this day she cries when she sees a tree being chopped down.

This year, she says, wasn't the best the in the garden. Because of the heat, but also because her son didn't have time to help her too much and because she had lost a couple of dear friends this year. But she still loves the gardening. And she especially appreciates the addition of the bench. Now she can go in, tend to her garden and then go sit on the bench for a while, take in the whole ambiance, and rest a bit before going back to pulling the weeds. She loves how the community garden has always been a real community – people helping one another, sharing tips, sharing seeds, sharing what they harvest, sharing their enthusiasm and taking pride in what is growing.

Does she have any tips for new gardeners? “When you grow some of it yourself, you appreciate that farming is actually a lot of hard work, and it makes you think differently about the food you buy in the market and the farmer's hard work that went into providing it for you.” But if you want to start gardening, “Enjoy it! Plant from seeds. Watch your seeds to see it all grow. It's always good to be there – to get out there and feel the earth. You haven't tasted a tomato until you have picked it and eaten it then and there, right off the vine. And the fresh green beans, you've gotta taste one of those!”

--Kathy Schwarz

From Our Newest Gardeners

After Kathy's interview with our longest-participating gardener, Wilsie Reese, I reached out to our newest gardeners, who joined the garden this year. I asked them to reflect upon their first season in the garden. Brenda Ghantous, in plot 7A, said her favorite things to grow this year were her lettuce greens, “crisp and so satisfying,” and her spicy arugula. Like Wilsie, Brenda also planted flowers: “I love my zinnias. The color burst through the season was awesome.”



I also asked the new gardeners what lessons they learned this year. Brenda said, “My dreams of growing butternut squash did not pan out as I hoped. I had tremendous vines of gorgeous green leaves, and yellow blossoms yet sadly no fruit to speak of.” However, she has plans for next year, including “more flowers, and a few potted roses. I love roses and my little shaded condo yard does not support growing roses. So I am excited to container garden in my plot next year 2 or 3 scented roses.”

Brenda's other advice for herself and other new gardeners for next year includes bed planning: “I also see that planning the bed is better than my scattershot method of this year. I would like to have little

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plots of various flowers and a few necessary vegetables in a way that I can get to them without crushing other plants that I was growing.” She added, “It was hard for me to get my head around the idea that a few seeds actually do the trick. More is not necessarily better, I found.”

Our newest gardeners expressed a great appreciation for their first year in the garden. Brenda ended by sharing, “I loved coming to the garden and seeing what other people did. There is so much art going on in our community garden.”

--Liz Cherry

Pleasantly Surprised

I have had a plot in the community garden for 8 years now. It is a joy every year, but a new joy every year because it is different every year.



Maybe 6 years ago I decided to try planting potatoes, having never done so before. I bought an organic potato from the health food store in Nyack (sadly no more), left it on my counter for a couple of weeks until it sprouted; I cut out the eyes and planted them. Then I waited. They yielded beautiful plants and I was very excited. They flourished in that form for a couple of months and then they seemed to die. Again, having never planted potatoes before, I assumed my experiment had failed – that I had killed my potato plants somehow, so I decided, “well, I guess that’s it for my being a potato grower.” But then November arrived and it was time to dig up my entire plot. I almost left that spot alone, but decided to turn the soil over. To my great surprise, there were lots of potatoes! And those potatoes were fabulous - so much better than any I had ever bought in the supermarket! And they lasted in my cupboard for a number of months into the winter. I have been planting potatoes and then sweet potatoes every year since. One of the joys for me is that I

have no idea how they are doing underground until I dig them out in the fall. Last year I had so many sweet potatoes, and the vines had infiltrated the plots on either side of mine, so I shared the harvest with my neighbors on both sides.

Another way to bring the element of surprise into my gardening is that I save seeds from my harvests or even from some veggies I buy in the supermarket. I dry out the seeds over the winter (mostly squash seeds) without bothering to label them and then plant a few in a designated spot in my garden and wait to see which ones yield. This year I had yellow summer squash, 1 spaghetti squash, 1 acorn squash, and several beautiful butternuts. The biggest problem was that the vines took over other areas in my plot and shaded out my bok choy and lettuce. (I tried to control them to make sure they didn’t overwhelm my neighbors’ plots!) I have never had any luck planting pepper plants from saved seeds. But last year, lo and behold, I harvested 1 delicious cantaloupe!

Beyond this, I try to plant something new every year. One year I decided to try kohlrabi. You almost never see kohlrabi in the supermarket or even at the farmer's market and I didn't know if I had ever tried them. But they sure looked pretty in the Johnny Seeds catalog. Well, those kohlrabi turned out to be so beautiful! Their gorgeous purple bulbs peeking up out of the ground! I haven't planted them since, so they're not my favorite vegetable, but now it's on to something else that's new. Maybe I'll try fennel or jicama next year.

One of the loveliest surprises this year was seeing a monarch butterfly pupae on my eggplant. I wish I could be around at the right moment to see it hatch into its mature self and fly away!

Of course I realize the great luxury I have growing some of my food in my half plot in Nyack Community Garden. If my squash starts overwhelming my lettuce crop, I can always go to Old World and buy lettuce. If my potato plants had really died, I could always have gone to the farmer's market to buy my potatoes. The element of surprise isn't usually such a luxury for our farmers. The wrong kinds of surprises could lead to their own financial collapse or, on a bigger scale, to people going hungry. But for me, the personal element of surprise is one of the great joys of the community garden.

--Kathy Schwarz

Great Nyack Get Together Thanks You



A HUGE thanks to Jill Remaly, David Raiken, Marie Carmel Grube, Robin Brown and Susanna Bozhkov for staffing our Nyack Community Garden table/booth at the Great Nyack Get Together in the park on Saturday September 15. I especially appreciate Jill setting up the table, display and the "Guess How Many Vegetable" in the container and Susanna and Robin for taking the table apart and following up with the winner of the "Guess How Many Vegetables" activity.

I hope that some or many of you were able to attend. The weather was on the warm side but there were places to sit and walk in the shade while listening to music, eating good food from the 7 vendors that were there and participating in all the free family activities. The Big Super slide, Bouncy Castle and Human Foosball were popular, and the Art Café won the Human Foosball Tournament between bars for the second year in a row! They have a big trophy behind their coffee bar. Check it out next time you are there.

A loud Shout Out to John Dunnigan for donating the Pickwick Book Shop \$25 Gift Certificate for the winner of the "Vegetable" activity.

Look forward to seeing you all at our Fall Community Garden Banquet in October!

--Rena Leeming

2018 Dates to Remember

- Mondays, around 10am** Plant A Row veggies in cooler will be given to food bank
- Thursday, Oct. 18** Pot Luck Dinner with prizes awarded to attending contest winners and free raffle for all attendees
- Saturday, Nov. 3** Garden closes, all items removed and plots restored to state as of April 8
- Saturday, Nov. 10** 8:00 AM sharp: Winter prep clean-up

Save the Date for the Pot-Luck Dinner!

See you on Thursday, October 18, 6:30pm, Nyack Senior Center



The annual Pot-luck Dinner of the Nyack Community Garden always has great food. Gardeners each bring a dish of their choosing that will serve ten or more. There is an abundance of tasty items ranging from soups to desserts. Typically, both meat-eaters and vegetarians have delicious options. Many dishes include produce grown at our garden, but store-brought items are welcome, too. The Dinner is a time of great conversations, including terrific gardening discussions. What's new this year to make our evening even better?

- Awards ceremony with gifts to the winners of the Garden Contest in attendance.
- An opportunity for all gardeners in attendance to win a special gift. You will receive a raffle ticket and there will be a drawing.
- A “more the merrier” invitation to gardeners to bring spouse, a friend and/or children. Please bring a larger “pot” if your contingency is large.

Drinks are provided and the event takes place in the evening at the Nyack Senior Center. Adrienne Alarco (adriennealcaro@rocketmail.com) is the chair of the Pot-Luck Dinner committee, and she and several other committee members will be organizing this year's event. We look forward to seeing you there!