

Albert's - Louise Kruger
Interview by Grace Tankersley

Can you just tell me your name?

Yeah, I'm Louise Kruger and I'm one of the people starting the garden. It was started by Albert who lived down the street and he's the one who cleared out all the refrigerators and tin cans and bottles and started planting and then moved out west and so then Ben Walburg and I and a couple of people picked up from there and started shaping the garden. And a lot of the things were things that people were throwing out or we traded things with other gardens and all that's kind of fun, I think. And then there were people who lived in the county brought things in for us like our ferns came from the country. And so you know, we've been here thirty some years.

So when exactly did the garden begin.

71 or 72 we started.

Were you involved with the green guerillas?

No, we started close to the same time, but ah, no, although they used to have give aways and I got some plants there, yeah. Now they're much more formalized, so they don't do that sort of thing. But there was a lot of co-operation between the gardens in terms of things that were needed.

Is that still the case?

Not so much, you know, I think they're more settled and, they're either no longer at risk, because we were at risk for about twenty years.

Yeah, I know.

And we were up for auction three times and fought that back and then, just in the nick of time the mayor decided the Trust for Public Land could buy a hundred gardens. They bought actually, sixty, and Bette Middler's group bought another forty, and so those gardens were saved.

So, you're part of the public land trust.

We're part of the public land trust and I guess there'll be a separate Manhattan land trust and a separate Bronx and Queens so there'll be three separate land trusts.

Do they give you financial support also or do they just give..

I think they will give something. I'm not sure quite what but that's another thing altogether. No one's ever really done a real fund raising so we're always doing thing by ...

By hook or by crook?

I wasn't going to say that because it sounds like we would do things by hook or by crook. No mainly it was by trading and anywhere there was a give-a-way, we'd hop along.

How many members...

Oh about 20, but really, they move and come and go, so mainly there's about 3 or 4 who on a steady basis and at this point there

isn't really a lot heavy to do. It's so heavily planted there's not a lot of room for weeds, hardly and so it's mainly a matter of keeping it watered and thinning out once in a while. I'm going to thin out hostas and do a give away on those, you know, things like that

when you do a give-away what do you, Do you just notify other gardeners you know

Yeah, oh we tell people and ask if maybe if there's something they want to trade or just give 'em I've given several of them away already. So, it's all kind of, you know, rather informal.

I know. That's the beauty of these gardens.

Well, that's what fun about it, because we have managed to keep going for thirty some years without being supervised by any authority and it can be done.

Yeah

And sometimes you don't get things exactly when you want or you can't just go out and buy a bunch of things but you go in another way, trading and bartering and one thing and another

you manage

yeah and you take advantage of what exists. Like that big tree, it's a catalpa. It's the biggest one I've ever seen. And then these three mulberries were brought by the birds this tall locust and the one up front there were brought by the birds and we just left them. That's a mountain ash. I think someone gave us that and Albert had a garbage heap back there and he threw in a peach pit in and a peach tree grew out of that.

Grew out of the compost.

Yeah and it produced a few peaches. So, there's surprises. And that makes it kind of fun too.

In the city, if you tried to plan meticulously you'd have a lot of grief. Because sometimes people climb the wall and sleep someplace or do something, but we haven't had anyone destroy things for a long time. We used to have. When there was a full building there with people who were pretty angry at the world and they'd come in sometimes, and so kind of a mess, but, you know.

Some of the other gardeners said they have or have had trouble with people stealing plants. Have you had any.

Well, not recently. The trust gave us that lovely fence and that made a big difference. People can't climb that as readily, but we did, we used to and even when you're in the garden and people came in. I mean, I've turned around and seen people digging things up.

Laugh

that's right. Incredible and people don't feel that stealing plants is stealing, somehow. And they used to have two fences. A tall link fence and a shorter one and we put bushes out there and people came and dug up, you know, big bushes.

Amazing.

So, it's interesting and early on it was a bit of an adventure in many ways, but very pleasant and when it's open on a nice day a lot of people come in and they're always kind of amazed because it's not a regimented garden. I think that appeals to a lot of people. They come in and it's very restful and there are places to sit in the sun and the shade or whatever and that's nice. It's nice to see people come and their eyes kind of light up. And particularly people who come from out of town and in New York there's no place to sit down.

That's true and all these gardens have...

And with theaters and one thing and another all around here, there are a lot of out of towners and it's a great relief for them. But ah.. what else did you want to know. I've kind of run on.

No, no, that's exactly what we'd like. I mean this is going to be a little guide book that people can carry around with them so..

You'll be picking out whatever

yeah, so there's isn't going to be that much information. You know when people are likely to find it open and a

well, generally there is someone here between about four and six everyday and it's been pretty steady, but our hours have been kind of irregular, because it's hard to have anyone come to sit. I don't know why that's so hard, but it.

I actually signed up to work in the garden with you, but then I got a job and things changed. And it changed within about a weeks time.

Oh yes,

but when this job ends in the fall, I'll give you a call, because it's such a pleasant place.

No, it really is and I try to give a sales pitch on people sitting because it's a great place to sit and read or just to be restful and think about things. Don't people sit and read anymore? Or I suggest things, like you know, bring your Sunday paper. It's very difficult. Awfully lot of the neighborhood now isn't so much families and that kind of thing and it's more, rather transient. Young business and the students across the street.

When you first moved here, was this more of a family oriented neighborhood?

Oh, yes, oh absolutely. Almost entirely. Very few of this young business types who come and go. (Or you can see pictures of the garden a little while back?)

Did most of the original gardeners, did they have gardening experience.?

Two of them were really terrific. One was really a first rate gardener. And he's the one who dug the pond and he brought a lot of shrubs and things. Like I think he brought that and I don't know what else. And he also designed some of the paths and wanted these curves paths rather than a grid and I think that's made one of the really pleasant things about this garden, don't know why no one else has done that.

Was that Albert or was that someone else?

No, that was Ben, Ben Wohlburg, who used to live over in the next block. And let me see. This is the one I was looking for. This is that spring pageant that they have.

Was that this year.

I think it's that or a it's a, I don't have my glasses on, or it's a wedding. What does it look like.

Well, it actually looks like it could be either one.

But you know from time to time we had ... that's this wall, before we had the pond or anything there.

So did you leave some the graffiti for old times sake

well, there wasn't much to do with that other than to paint over it or something and so we just left it and it's been kind of fading away.

(Looking at pictures)

that's the trust. And the person who first started things was Albert, who lived down the... And this is the way it looked when I first saw it. It was all concrete and he got all that up and carried it out. There was the basket, they made it a play court or something, and it's one of those things. If you don't have supervision too, they just go to pieces very fast. It's a nice thought, but it just didn't work.

And there are visitors to the garden during that time.

A meeting we had Michael Brady was one of the gardeners along with, Yeah, we were right up to the day auction and Koch stepped in

in '89

and saved us. There I am at the pond. We got some plants and they threatened to swallow the pond. You know you try things and see. That's Ben and she used to have a catering service down there, Susan. She still lives in the neighborhood. She wasn't a gardener, but she was very helpful, (very kind, at the time, at various times?) And this was when Koch saved the garden.

And that was 89, beginning of August 89?

Uh huh, one of the times it was saved, yeah. And there's Ben again and Susan. And there's Susan looking like she's working. She was very helpful early on, but she's not a gardener, but we get into the spirit of photographing so that was that.

So.

Alright, I think that's

More than enough

well more than we need for this one little book, although it's all very interesting.

Grace Tankersley, *Community Gardens of the East Village*, c. 2009 (out of print)