

A History of Albert's Garden

Compiled by EJay Sims, 2017; updated 2020

Albert's Garden at 16 and 18 East 2nd Street is a plot of land originally housing two brownstones that the City of New York repossessed for unpaid taxes. When they were torn down as "unsafe" in 1968, the land was remade into a basketball court but, after a few years, this attempt at neighborhood recreational use failed.



16 E. 2nd St 18 E. 2nd St
NYC Municipal Tax Photos 1940s

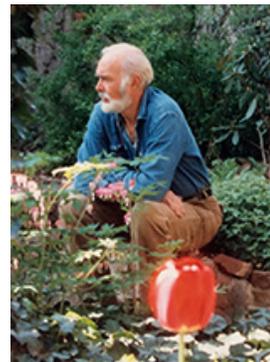
In 1971, founding member Albert Eisenlau, an antiques dealer and local resident who was also involved in the Liz Christy Garden nearby at Bowery and Houston Street, started cleaning up the lot and was joined in this endeavor by other members of the community including founding members Ben Wohlburg and Louise Kruger. They began to turn it into a garden by digging up the asphalt basketball court to make way for planting. Louise found the initial soil for plant support which was donated by a female sculptor friend of hers who had installed it as an earthwork in a gallery.



Albert O. Eisenlau, Jr.
10 E. 2nd St



Louise Kruger
30 E. 2nd St



Ben Wohlburg
Bond St.

The garden was ultimately named for Albert, as he became a central moving force to help

shape it into the present-day fully-realized garden. Lending his expertise by planting many of the garden's now-mature shrubs, perennials, and trees, Albert was rumored to have brought in dirt, one cup at a time, and started what became the violet section. Albert, Louise and Ben were enthusiastic transplinters, and early plantings brought in the Redbud tree, the Acuba (gold dust plants), the Kerria and Wisteria, Roses, Peonies and Hydrangeas, Hellebores and Hostas and much ivy. Early on, Ben laid out some of the paths, which remain a central feature of Albert's. Louise, who was a sculptor, used the garden as an outdoor studio. She worked primarily in wood and often could be seen in the center of the garden, chipping away to produce her sculptures and neatly adding the shavings to the mulch paths. In homage to that activity, Albert's Garden still continues to employ cedar chips on its meandering paths.

Albert and Ben eventually left the garden, but Louise continued for many years, thereafter contributing both her design and her gardening skills to create and maintain the quiet aesthetic of contemplation and serenity that the garden still practices. Her concept was of a garden in various shades of green throughout the seasons. In its earlier days the east wall was thick with ivy and trumpet vines. Bird baths were installed and the garden became a habitat for city birds as well as other small wildlife. Louise had said that its current major trees, including three mulberries and two tall locusts, "grew naturally from seeds that birds dropped." At one time along the north wall, there was also an peach tree (now replaced by an apple) that Louise said grew from a seed that Albert had pitched into a pile of debris. A fish pond, made from a depression in the ground in the back, remains a favorite focus near the western wall.

In the 70s, the neighborhood was undergoing a cultural evolution. Louise's outdoor studio even hosted a puppet theater from 1972-73 that held performances in the central sitting area. Around the corner, CBGBs, a rock club, opened and became the mecca of the Punk Rock scene. The Ramones, a punk band, released their album *Ramones* in 1976, featuring a photo of them taken along the west wall of Albert's Garden (in the area that is now the fish pond). They had posed there for Roberta Bayley, then a staff photographer for *Punk* magazine, and the photo, which initially appeared in the magazine, later became one of the most recognizable album covers in history. Music enthusiasts from all over the world continue today to make a pilgrimage to visit this same wall.



Ramones

Throughout the 70s and into the mid-80s the community garden movement in the City continued to grow and prosper, especially in the East Village, which then boasted numerous sites. Gardens that had been cultivated throughout the 70s in many low-income neighborhoods were eventually acknowledged officially through a city-sponsored Operation GreenThumb program. Albert's registered with GreenThumb as a "Neighborhood Wildlife Sanctuary" and even won a "Best Garden" award.



NYC Municipal Tax Photos c1983-88

In 1986 to build housing, the City destroyed [Adam Purple's Garden of Eden](#), known world-wide for its colorful concentric circles of flowers, plants, and trees in a yin/yang central design. The bulldozing of this legendary garden signaled a potential plight all the gardens might eventually face, and then an economic downturn after 1987 halted and slowed development that would eventually threaten the gardens. Mid-90s real estate pressures did finally affect the fate of a number of these gardens. In 1998, Albert's Garden was threatened when Mayor Rudolf Giuliani declared an auction to rid the city of the financial burden that empty lots-turned-into-gardens represented. Local residents rose in response and began protesting, disrupting public meetings and chaining themselves to prevent bulldozing in their determination to stop the sales of lots. Louise Kruger and present garden member Connie Barrett banded together with other defenders of gardens on the Lower East Side and citywide to testify at City hearings and to participate in public demonstrations, under the leadership of GreenThumb, the Green Guerrillas, and the Trust for Public Land (TPL).



Connie Barrett and Louise Kruger

In 1998, Albert's Garden was saved when 114 community gardens that had been put up for sale were purchased by the TPL and Bette Midler's New York Restoration Project. Albert's deed, along with 60 others, were purchased by the Trust for Public Land. The TPL further helped the Garden

to build a new shed and to replace the front chain-link fence with the present wrought iron one in 2001, thereby increasing security and expanding the garden out to the edge of the sidewalk. From 1999 to 2009, the TPL underwent a long process of establishing land trusts in the boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn, Queens, and Manhattan; in 2014, the Manhattan Land Trust (MLT) was born, and TPL turned over 14 deeds to them among which was Albert's Garden. The MLT still owns the land and Albert's now exists in perpetuity as a member of this organization who provides a much-needed connection to the city water system. Albert's no longer had to hook up hoses to a fire hydrant across the street.



"Bird Mural" by Roa

From the 70s into the early 2000s, Louise Kruger continued to maintain and manage the Garden, along with a group of volunteers. A generous soul, she was known to give keys to anyone who struck her fancy, so the locks had to be changed many times. She had been introduced to the Belgian street muralist, Roa, who paints grotesquely beautiful urban birds and animals native to the locality. As one of her last flourishes before she died in 2013, she invited Roa to paint a large mural of a blackbird next to the front gate. This distinct mural, visible from halfway down the block, remains one of the garden's most popular cultural attractions.

Albert died in 1986 and Louise passed in 2013. At a ceremony attended by Louise Kruger's family, friends, and Albert's Garden members, Louise's ashes were spread throughout the garden in the shadow of the historic stone wall that Albert's shares with The New York Marble Cemetery which was incorporated in 1831. Ben moved to Block Island where he is still painting at 96.



Albert's Garden c1995-6

In 1995 new members were recruited and these volunteer gardeners diversified, reorganized and began to hold regular meetings, a practice that is still maintained. In 2010 as the result of a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation, bench seating was added and the peripheral paths of brick with cobble stone edging were widened to make the garden more accessible while still keeping the original flavor of the meandering interior mulch paths.

The garden blooms prolifically in early spring but is mainly a shade oasis of mature, well-established perennials that offer varying beauty throughout all seasons; visitors locally and from around the world find solace here and praise its green restfulness. Albert's continues to provide space for small community cultural events, such as poetry readings and restful music, and hosts a Halloween party every year at its fall closing. It is also available on a limited basis for private gatherings, such as weddings and other ceremonies.



Albert's Garden Halloween 2010

In June of 2014 the garden incorporated into a not-for-profit 501c (3) organization and its operation continues to be directed by its volunteer membership. Albert's is always interested in recruiting new members, the better to serve the community and help maintain open hours during many months of the year. Please consult our website [Membership](#) page for more information.

— Resources

- Sarah Ferguson, “Short History” for Newbies, 1999; “ Albert's Garden is filled with carved African totems, the legacy of Albert Eisenlau, a sculptor who died in 1999.” www.hort.net/lists/community_garden
- Marcia Newfield, [Albert's Garden](#), poem written for the **Earth Celebrations Rites of Spring Processions** on May 18, 2002
- 2004 [Interview with Louise Kruger](#) conducted by Grace Tankersley for her book, “Community Gardens of the East Village,” c.2009
- Historical notes by members Connie Barrett and John Shuttleworth, 2016/2020
- www.streetartbio.com/roa
- www.rollingstone.com/music/news/ramones by Jordan Runtagh 2/4/201
- 2017 Interview with Jean Ovitt, long-time early member and former chair of Albert's Garden, conducted by EJay Sims and Barbara Horn
- Louise Kruger, 1924-2013 www.louisekrugerart.com/ <https://lkrartblog.wordpress.com/>
- Ben Wohlberg, www.benwohlberg.com
- NYC Municipal Archives: Borough, Block & Lot: #18 – 1/458/40; #16 – 1/458/41

Additional research and photos: EJay Sims Editing: Barbara Horn Additional editing: Francine Lange