

## Editorial

### Rudy, Rudy? Why can't the gardens grow?

Community gardens are a little like motherhood: no one really is against them. Except -- at least according to the pro-garden groups -- maybe Mayor Giuliani.

The gardens -- for some of them, admittedly, it is a courtesy title -- have gained a unique place in the social fabric of the city since they were first created in the 1960s as arson and neglect ravaged many of the city's neighborhoods. People like Liz Christy took the forlorn stretches of broken brick and garbage-strewn lots and created something living and hopeful from them. In a city that seemed so brutally to have its future behind it, the gardens were a rare symbol of hope. Frequently, as the first green daffodil sprouts appeared or the first forsythia bush bloomed, the gardens were the setting for festive celebrations that helped forge community bonds that have persisted to this day.

And nowhere were community gardens more important than on the Lower East Side where the afflictions of the city's decay were most severe. Particularly for young people distressed with the political system that, in the name of preserving democracy, had led America into the Vietnam War and which suppressed dissent in displays of official brutality such as that which overshadowed the Democratic Party convention in Chicago, the gardens were powerful symbols of a kinder and gentler society.

Now, as the Lower East Side and other similar parts of the city are being renewed by new immigrants and young people unable to cope with rents in more sedate neighborhoods, the city has announced that on May 12 and 13 it will auction more than 100 properties, many of them long-standing community gardens. Understandably, the rhetoric on both sides has been of a high-decibel variety. And both sides have some merit in their arguments.

From the city's viewpoint, the administration has a duty to get the lots back on the tax rolls and in some cases to make them available for housing projects that will help ease the housing crunch for middle and low-income residents. But, as is so typical of many of the administration's schemes, the execution of the plan has been high-handed and intolerant of criticism. It has been a case of their way regardless and to the devil with any other suggestion.

That is unfortunate.

Other responsible political figures, Councilmembers Margarita Lopez and Kathryn Freed among them, have been willing to make compromises, endorsing plans, for example, that will genuinely help the acute housing crisis the city still faces.

But at the same time they insist that the gardens have in many cases become important community assets in neighborhoods that suffer seriously from a lack of open space. The gardens that fill this need should be preserved. Indeed they should be enhanced by being designated officially as parks. There are precedents for such action, the beautiful Jefferson Market Garden in the Village being one of them.

The Mayor and his administration would be well-served by listening to these suggestions.

By Ira Blumenthal

## Talking Point

### Sunset for Albert's Garden?

BY KEITH CRANDELL

Right now, in mid-spring, the flowers are well in bloom in Albert's Garden. You can feast your eyes on reds and yellows and pinks and lavenders, and a rainbow of other colors too delicate to be described in a single word. Sit in the sun on a weekend afternoon. Taste the scents of blooms and earth. The sounds of song drift over from the rear yard of the nearby Amato Opera as singers rehearse in the open air.

And the birds! I do not see them, but their presence is a delightful constant, as if a compact-disc player were playing exquisite ornithological CD's from its hiding place under the purple azaleas.

The birds will be augmented late this month when, if history is a guide, migratory birds heading north will make a stopover at Albert's Garden, one of two community gardens in the city designated as a Backyard Wildlife Habitat by the National Wildlife Federation. The Audubon Society will be here to take a census.

For a guy who lived as a kid across the New York Central tracks from the New York Botanical Garden in the Bronx, Albert's Garden is pretty small crocuses. It's only 45 feet wide by 65 feet deep. The outlines of its walks are marked by twigs rather than wrought iron. The walks themselves are wood chips, donated by a local wood sculptor, Louise Krueger. Its benches are homemade. But every inch of it, every leaf, every April flower, every guppy in the little fish pond bespeaks the love and care and dedication of its community. It is as dear to the hearts of its neighbors as the huge Bronx Botanical Garden was to my family.

Albert's is on E. Second St. between the Bowery and Second Ave. It's mostly a residential block and because it's not a through street, a relatively quiet block. The garden was begun 30 years ago by a retired neighbor named Albert Eisenlow, since deceased. With other neighbors, he cleared the typical ugly vacant New York lot of rubble and started planting. They were helped by the presence of a great, brooding ivy-covered ailanthus tree at the rear of the lot. Now the official Albert's Garden planting list enumerates 73 plantings, plus a bird bath and a fish pond.

A young man came into the garden the other day and expressed wonder.

"Is that bleeding heart?," he asked, referring to the delicate flowers under the ailanthus. "I've never seen it except in pictures."

He took a photograph.

On the wall at the entrance are testimonials to the excellence of Albert's Garden stemming from the days when Ed Koch was Mayor. There is, ironically, a citation from the Giuliani Parks Department and its Greenthumb Garden coordinator, Jane Weissman.

I say ironically, because Weissman was as infuriated as Albert's Garden neighbors at the 1998 decision of the Mayor to destroy Albert's Garden, to bulldoze its clematis and its jonquils and its crab apple tree and its rose of Sharon and its hyacinths and even its tough old ailanthus. To her credit, she walked off the job she held for 14 years.

Mayor Giuliani isn't just after Albert's Garden. He's targeted 126 small gardens spread over much (but not all) of the city. (Only one in the Mayor's stronghold of Staten Island.) Ask a city bureaucrat why they've decided to destroy these oases of serenity and he'll tell you that they're needed to create low-income housing for poor families who can't find places to live.

If you believe that, you believe in the tooth fairy.

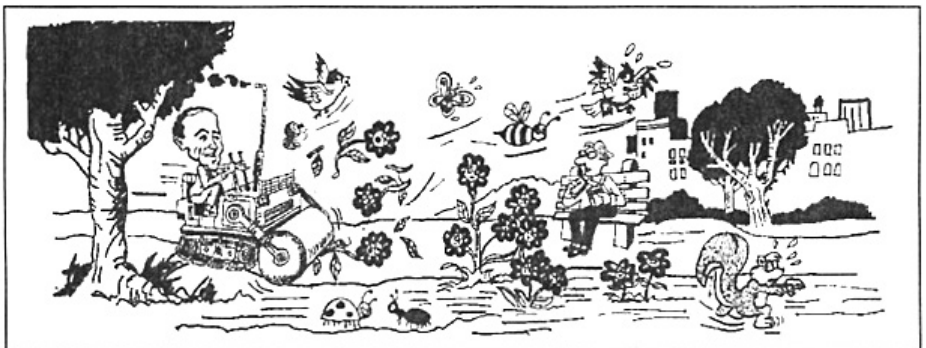
If the Mayor (no bird-lover he) has his way, Albert's Garden will be auctioned off to the highest bidder on May 12 or 13 at Police Headquarters, of all places. Neighbors of Albert's Garden do not believe that bidders on small, empty sites in the East Village will buy the land to build nice homes for poor people. Me neither.

Albert's Garden advocates are trying their best to upset the Mayor's plans. They are urging the City Council to take a position in opposition. They've won the support of Community Board 3. Neighbors Diane Dunbar and Jim Herms have given me cards to dispatch to Governor Pataki asking him to use the resources of the Environmental Bond Act to establish community land trusts to protect the gardens. Alice Morris, a poet, describes the effort of the More Gardens Coalition to persuade the City Council to fight for community gardens. There will probably, they say, be civil disobedience demonstrations on May 5 at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, where prospective bidders have been invited for a pre-auction seminar.

Frankly, I do not understand this Mayor. Here he is, contemplating a run for the United States Senate, while at the same time he comes out four-square against robins and roses. I'm not surprised that he's against bleeding heart. But robins and roses?

I hope this is not sunset for Albert's Garden. Or for similar gardens through the city. A civilized urban society needs community gardens such as Albert's. If you agree the number for the More Gardens Coalition is 330-6851.

April 21, 1999. THE VILLAGER, p. 10



'Mayor Giuliani goes gardening'