

THE BOUNTY OF THE BOROUGH

**THE FIVE BOROUGH
FARM PROJECT
IS SHOWING
NEW YORK WHAT
ALL IT CAN GROW.**

BY MELANIE REHAK



The Leave It Better Kids' Community Garden, in the Morris Heights section of the Bronx, occupies a corner lot just a few blocks from an elevated part of the subway line that runs along Jerome Avenue. A pawn shop and a run-down deli are on either side, and the Gospel Tabernacle Church is around the corner. It's a calm, green space amid cell phone stores, fast food franchises, apartment blocks, and the constant noise of traffic and passing trains. The garden now houses 23 raised planting beds and a compost bin built by the community. It used to be a site of rat-infested dissolution that was shut down by the city in 2010, though anyone who wanted to further vandalize the place had broken hinges on the gate and

missing pieces in the iron fencing to work with. According to Joshua, a neighborhood teenager who helped transform it literally from the contaminated soil up, "It was garbage."

We were standing by thriving garlic beds on a warm day in early June. I was getting a garden tour from Dominique Bouillon, the community outreach director of Leave It Better, the nonprofit that runs the garden. Joshua went on, smiling at Bouillon with shy pride from underneath his Knicks cap. "We all met and we got along, and we cleaned it up and made it into a community park." The effects of this coming together, as Bouillon tells it, are many and welcome even just a few years into the garden's existence. People

in the neighborhood now plant and harvest as a group. They often make communal meals from what they grow or else bring home food to supplement what they buy elsewhere, which helps them financially and nutritionally. "This community has a high diabetes rate and very high childhood obesity rates," Bouillon says. "So this is teaching kids that food comes not just from a store in boxes and cans, but from the ground, and how growing food is connected to the environment and health."

With all gradual change, it can be hard to grasp progress or explain it to others. This is where the Five Borough Farm project comes in, a collaboration between the Design Trust for Public Space and groups ranging

ABOVE
East New York Farms,
in Brooklyn.

ROB STEPHENSON



ABOVE
The Battery Urban Farm, in Manhattan.

RIGHT
There are at least nine community or commercial farms and nearly 500 community gardens in New York City.

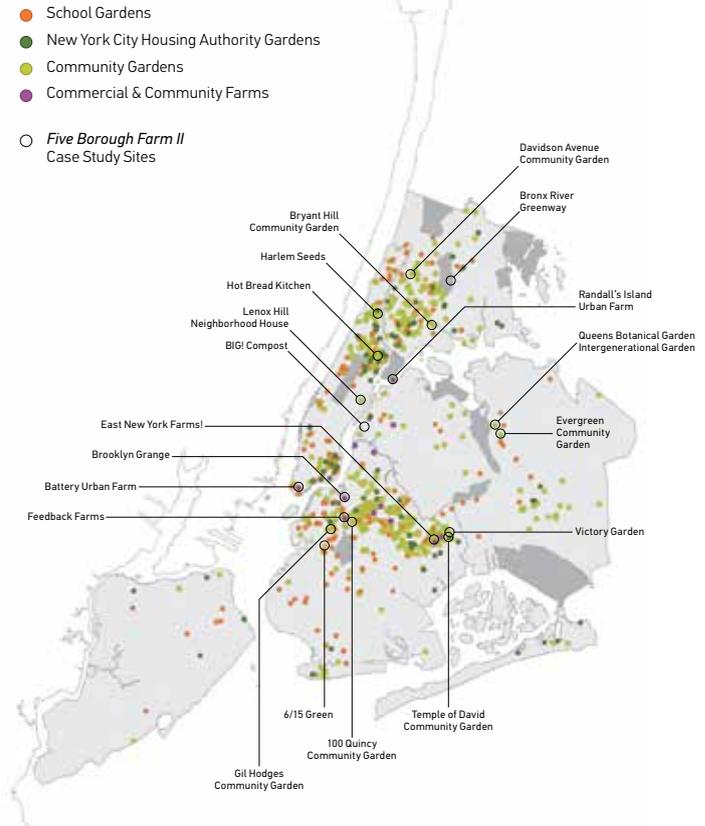
from local nonprofits like Leave It Better to the New York City Department of Parks & Recreation. The first phase of the three-part project, which ran from 2009 to 2012, produced a full overview of New York's urban agriculture landscape and a set of policy recommendations for lawmakers, as well as a "tool kit" of 14 simple methods, developed with the input of New York City gardeners and farmers, to measure various aspects of performance such as food and compost production, how gardening affects mood, and hours of participation. After a test run during the 2013 growing season, the metrics became available online through Farming Concrete, the nonprofit that helped develop them; Leave It Better Kids was one of many groups that eagerly adopted them. The data Bouillon and her colleagues record will be used to attract the attention of funders and politicians—many community gardens, which show up as empty spaces on maps, are in perpetual danger of being razed by developers—but it also has a deeper,

more personalized function. With hard facts in hand, Bouillon believes, the residents of this Morris Heights neighborhood will be able to truly understand precisely what their garden is doing for them in terms that make sense for their community. "No two gardens are alike," says Philip Silva, an outreach fellow at the Design Trust, of the data collection kit's wide range of ways to assess. "Each has its own unique membership and its own unique wavelength. You have to strike a balance between the massive citywide scale and what's most relevant to the individual gardens."

But considering that larger scale is also a critical part of Five Borough Farm, which made viewing it from many angles the explicit aim of the project's second phase. From 2012 until earlier this year, a group of fellows focused on bringing the city's

enormously diverse urban agriculturists together as a powerful force for advocacy, as well as on land-use strategies that might start to take the larger picture on the ground into account. "You start seeing it all as a big network, and paying attention to where you are in the world and what are your adjacencies," explains Barbara Wilks, FASLA, the founder of W Architecture and Landscape Architecture and the trust's green infrastructure fellow. "We had this idea of looking at an existing linear system"—the Bronx River Greenway—"and how it was connected to park infrastructures, school infrastructures, and native plants, and how we could tie it into some bigger systems that are happening in the city. This was a chance to dream about it, which we don't get to do on a real project, and think, 'Wouldn't it be great if somehow they could all work together more?' The

FARMS AND GARDENS IN NEW YORK CITY





ABOVE
In the shade of Kissena
Corridor Community
Garden, in Queens.

challenges these days have to do with integrating, and what's really going to make us sustainable as a species is thinking about these things." The exercise was as much about intangible connections as more concrete ones—what Wilks calls "further development of our cultural and social infrastructure along with our natural infrastructure."

At the Battery Urban Farm, where Wilks and I are perched on a wooden bench made from a log, surrounded by kale, lettuce, snap peas, and herbs that grow robustly—if incongruously—amid the tourist buses and office towers, the necessity of this line of thought is made almost absurdly obvious by the surroundings. A one-acre plot fenced in bamboo at the very bottom of Manhattan, the farm is halfway between the Staten Island Ferry terminal and the looming stone entrance to the Brooklyn–Battery Tunnel, both of which were closed down by flooding for days after Hurricane Sandy in 2012. If ever there was an event to make people

"YOU START SEEING IT ALL AS A BIG NETWORK."

—BARBARA WILKS, FASLA

reconsider the enormous workings of the city's infrastructures and the minutiae of their relationships with their neighbors simultaneously, Sandy was it. As the farm's unofficial mascot, a turkey named Zelda, wanders by, Wilks acknowledges the unintentional symbolism of our location. "But it's not just the Sandys; it's everything," she says. One of the goals of her work with Five Borough Farm is to get people excited about developing ways to make sure that "the basics of life are available," she says. "Not that we all have to be self-sustaining, but so at least there's something available locally. When things like Sandy happen, I think you realize how much being self-reliant and having that community—because these farms and gardens create community—add to resilience."

To that end, Battery Urban Farm, like many urban gardens, does an enormous amount of education in addition to producing about 300 pounds of food a week and serving as a compost drop site. In 2013 alone, 2,700 students came to the farm to learn about food, health, and the future. "They're encouraged to think about the climate and sustainability in a very simple way by the hands-on work they're doing," says Anna Scott Ellis, the farm educator at Battery Urban Farm. "It will get them to think about those things for their lives, and they're going to be a voice for those concerns." Battery Urban Farm also grows oysters for New York's Billion Oyster Project, undertaking the protection of the city's most vulner-

able lowlands in the event of another superstorm. Though it operates in a very different environment from Five Borough Farm participants such as the Leave It Better Kids' Garden—less as a place for a community to gather and more as a place for teaching—the information it collects through the project will be just as crucial to bolstering the argument for urban agriculture as a force that can change not only the way a few people eat, but the way an entire city can arm itself against climate change.

All of this, though, starts in the dirt. New York City's urban farms and gardens are, first and foremost, about the people who spend their time in them in whatever capacity. As the Five Borough Farm project enters its final phase, the hope is that it will help ensure not only that they aren't taken for granted, but that they'll "get into the DNA of the city" on all levels, as Silva puts it. Numbers, of course, are necessary and useful, but in the real world, it's still the human element that makes the best case for the enduring possibilities of gardens and farms. "They looked out their windows and said 'What's that?'" Ellis says of Battery Urban Farm's many volunteers who work in the surrounding buildings. "And then they decided to change out of their suits and come down." ●

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