

I AM, Because We Are

*Urban-farming pioneer Karen Washington
leads only so others will follow.*

BY CHERYL MORRISON

Karen Washington, an urban-farming pioneer, food-justice activist, president of the New York City Community Garden Coalition and teacher of agricultural techniques, is in the vanguard of the movement to make wholesome, locally grown food available to everyone. But until she bought her modest row house in the Bronx in 1985, Washington had never plunged her hands into soil or planted a seed. She even initially considered paving over the house's small backyard. Instead, motivated mainly by concern about health issues related to commercial foods, she decided to try growing vegetables.

PLANTING THE SEED

Washington's father managed the produce department in a grocery store, and she had grown up on

food from the supermarket. A lifelong resident of New York City, she had little awareness of where it grew, the work required to produce it or how it tasted when freshly harvested. She "hated tomatoes," knowing the flavorless variety that were the only ones available in grocery-store chains. One day, a friend gave Washington a tomato from her garden on Long Island. "When I bit into that tomato," she says, "I felt a sensation I had never felt before."

During her own inaugural season as a gardener, Washington learned by trial-and-error. She was amazed when sprouts emerged from the first seeds she planted and then continued to develop. "I was afraid to thin them," she confesses. The results, to no experienced gardener's surprise, were stunted plants.

"But I was very successful with tomatoes," Washington recalls. Thus encouraged, she "wanted to grow everything."

A Garden of Happiness

The Garden of Happiness, on Prospect Avenue in the Bronx, began as a neighborhood beautification project. When trash began accumulating on vacant land across the street from Karen Washington's modest, comfortable row house, she and some of her neighbors were distressed.

"My American dream was turning into my American nightmare," Washington says. "If you live next to garbage, people tend to associate you with that element."

One day, she looked across at the vacant lot and saw a man with a shovel and pick. "I went across the street and asked him, 'What are you doing?' He said, 'I'm thinking of starting a garden.' So I asked, 'Can I help?'"



Sometimes, she muses, "things just line up" to make good things happen. Developers who had planned to build on the land abandoned their plan when they learned of the bedrock that lay near its surface. Washington spotted a truck on the block with "Bronx Green-Up" painted on it, investigated and learned of the city's Operation GreenThumb initiative to turn empty lots throughout the city into community gardens. With the city's help, she and some neighbors worked together to clean up the quarter-acre plot and turn it into the Garden of Happiness.

Nearly 25 years later, the Garden of Happiness is divided into tidy plots where members grow fruits and vegetables for their own use and to sell in the weekly neighborhood farmers market during the summer months. The crops include herbs and vegetables rarely found in the United States that some of the neighborhood's immigrant families have brought from their ancestral homelands for use as ingredients in dishes their families have eaten for generations. A chicken coop holds the nests of a dozen or so hens of several varieties that wander about the garden by day and supply the neighborhood with eggs.

"Having chickens has been a highlight," Washington says. "It encourages people to come. They walk by, stop and call to the chickens. Kids ask questions about them."

The land that once inspired angry complaints now gives cause for celebration every year. "After the harvest, we close the street down for a block party," Washington says. "People bring food to share, and we talk. We have a corn-shucking race and a race for who can make the best bouquet in two minutes. We have contests for the biggest tomato and the longest squash. We celebrate another successful harvest. It's magical!"

MANY HARVESTS

Washington graduated summa cum laude from NYC's Hunter College in 1977 with a bachelor's in physical therapy and went on to earn a master's in occupational biomechanics and ergonomics from New York University. She naturally then turned to books to supplement what she was learning from the hands-in-the-soil experience. She found out which crops could thrive in her local climate and when to plant and harvest them. She read that soil can be enriched with compost made from eggshells and table scraps, and she has been composting ever since.

Washington's involvement in community gardening began when she worked with some neighbors to create a community garden on a vacant lot across the street from her house. (See "A Garden of Happiness," left.) Since then, she has helped to start numerous other community gardens in neighborhoods in the Bronx.

As a member of the La Familia Verde Garden Coalition, she helped to launch a City Farms Market so all her neighbors would have access to fresh produce straight from farms and gardens. She has little patience with the view that farmers markets are for the wealthy. When people who have cell phones and big-screen TVs and whose kids wear expensive sneakers tell her they can't afford the higher cost of farm-fresh food, she talks about the hidden costs of "cheap" processed food and suggests that they adjust their priorities.

Appreciation for wholesome food is catching on, Washington says, especially among young people. "They're seeing their aging parents and thinking, 'Mom and Dad are on dialysis.' They're starting to see the connection and saying to themselves, 'I don't want to be like that.'" In her work as a physical therapist, Washington meets many clients with heart conditions, diabetes and other problems related to what they eat.

After years of a national diet dominated by mass-produced foods, she says, "we're so accustomed to the taste of sugar and salt that we've lost the sense of bitter and sour." She encourages children as well as adults to try foods with more subtle flavors than salty and sweet, flavors that come from herbs rather than chemical processing. "If we're going to tackle the obesity problem, we need to start in the schools and understand where it comes from," she says.

FRUIT FROM LABOR

"When you talk about community gardens, the first word is community: people looking after one another, listening to each other's concerns," Washington says. In her neighborhood and others like it, those concerns include drugs, unemployment, poor health and lack of political power. "By going to the garden and listening to people talking about community issues, I got involved in community organizing," she says.

Eventually, Washington attended a meeting of The Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition, a group of community organizers. "When I walked into that

Taking Root

If you are in the New York City area, contact the organizations mentioned in this article to get involved.

Just Food: 1155 Avenue of the Americas, 3rd Floor, New York, NY 10036; 212-645-9880, ext. 221; www.justfood.org

New York City Community Garden Coalition: 232 E. 11th St., New York, NY 10003; 888-311-3993; www.nycgcg.org

room, it changed my life," she says. "I learned that I was not alone."

Mentors in the coalition taught her how to speak, how to arm herself with facts and so on, before she presented herself to politicians. They also taught her to prioritize issues and focus meetings on the most urgent ones, which she calls "hot spots," first.

"We had dress rehearsals," she says. "I learned to go into a meeting with a police chief or a politician with a list of hot spots and get those closed. Those are the trademarks that I've learned, and I now apply them to food and social justice."

Over the years, Washington's mission has expanded far beyond the cultivation of crops. A discussion of food "presents an opportunity to talk about race relations; the plight of black farmers, and fairness for migrants and others who work on farms but don't own land," she says.

"Don't forget fishermen," she adds. "They're farmers, too. And restaurant workers. When we talk about food, we need to broaden our horizons."

FROM STUDENT TO TEACHER

Washington is now on the executive board of Just Food, a nonprofit group formed in 1995 that promotes urban farming and organizes farming- and food-education workshops and community-supported-agriculture programs.

Just Food's latest venture grew out of a 2007 retreat that Washington attended with some other women involved with food-centered community organizing. "Everyone brought food, and we spent the weekend talking about our hopes and dreams," Washington says.

Several, including Washington, expressed dreams of going to a farm school. Soon afterward, Washington enrolled in a six-month apprenticeship program at the University of California's Center for Agroecology and Sustainable Food Systems in Santa Cruz, where she learned how to grow organic produce. She returned home at the end of the



apprenticeship with the dream of starting a farm school in New York City. She rounded up some other urban farmers from all over the city, and together, they came up with a plan, a curriculum, a timeline and ideas for where the teaching would take place.

Washington's dreams and the group's efforts bore fruit in 2011, when Farm School NYC: The New York City School of Urban Agriculture took in its first 15 students. With community gardens and urban farms throughout New York City serving as the school's classrooms and laboratories, the school offers a two-year certificate program in urban agriculture. It operates under the aegis of Just Food, which secured a \$500,000 grant from the U.S. Department of Agriculture for the certificate program. Student fees are on a sliding scale.

Students not pursuing certification can also enroll in one- to six-week courses on subjects such as crop planning, irrigation and propagation. Washington herself is teaching a course about season extension, where she will show how cold frames, sun boxes and similar devices can be used to prolong growing seasons.

Outside the classroom, Washington continues to share not only her hard-won, practical know-how but also her passion for fairness and justice when it comes to the growing and distribution of food.

"You can't say you've made it if the people around you are still struggling," she proclaims. "I am, because we are." ■

Cheryl Morrison divides her time between New York City and southern Vermont, endeavoring to live sustainably in both locales.

Karen Washington offers up NYC-grown cilantro at the City Farms Market, which sells produce grown by members of La Familia Verde Garden Coalition, a community of gardeners in the Bronx.