Oasis in the City
Greening Philadelphia

James Taylor wakes at 4 a.m., crosses his street of tidy row houses, and steps into the gate to Glenwood Green Acres. Four acres of green purpose meet his pale gray eyes.

If Taylor turned his gaze north, the outline of center city Philadelphia would pierce the dark sky, an abandoned factory looming in the foreground. Instead he looks straight ahead to his neighborhood garden.

Taylor and his late wife founded Glenwood Green Acres community garden nearly 20 years ago, following this idyll that destroyed the factory that once stood here at the 1800 block of Glenwood Avenue.

“My wife loved that garden so much I thought I’d put that right here,” Taylor said, turning towards a cornerstone, honoring the founding couple. “She was always out here.”

Urban gardening isn’t a new concept. What is special about Glenwood and other Philadelphia gardens is that they are permitted. The gardens can’t be shut down, paved over or built on.

“My community garden does not own the land where they garden,” said Terry Mushovic, Executive Director of Neighborhood Gardens Association/A Philadelphia Land Trust. “They are allowed to use the property as they wish as long as they care for it.”

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For more information on this story and land conservation in general, visit www.conserveland.org.

Leon Green

Little green infant of a watermelon, the first of theseason to appear on the vine.

On a hot July afternoon, Green fussed over the
NGA’s 24 gardens are as diverse as the
Glenwood Green Acres. Now retired, he labors inthe soil full-time and has increased the number ofplots he works. Green produces bushels of greenbeans, sweet potatoes, watermelon, butter beans,okra and potatoes in a season.

For 17 years Leon Green has been working in
themselves building gardens. The NeighborhoodGardens Association then helps the neighborsmake their improvements permanent.

Feed the block

Katsura is theneighborhood’s ninth baby to be raised in the garden.

I’ve raised my babies here,” McCabe said of her
their lots, unless property values
delinquent or do nothing with
structures come down,
lot. Then the gardening

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The Neighborhood Gardens Association works
to avoid this unpleasant scenario. By acquiringproperties or helping other community groups to
do so, NGA ensures that James Taylor will never
have to move his cotton and tobacco plants.

Urban growth

On hot summer days, Susan White takes
breaks from her vegetables and flowers to relax in
Seedy Acres’ shade with infant daughter, Kamara.
The community
garden, in the
Northern Liberties
part of Philadelphia,
has growing plots and
a common area where picnics and bandhousings are held. “The gardens bring people together.” White
said. “I live in my little house and you live in your
little house. In the garden I talk to people I never
would have if it wasn’t here.”

“I never would have talked to her—ever,”
shouted Sally McCabe, a fellow gardener.

NGA owns about one-third of the lots that
comprise Seedy Acres. The owners of some are
unknown and still others are becoming known as
sales of small lots increase in the recently popularresidential area.

For times my babies here,” McCabe said of her
fourteen and ten-year old children. “Kamara is the
neighborhood’s ninth baby to be raised in the garden.”

NGA hopes to purchase two additional lots so
that baby number 10, 11 and 12 can be raised with
green space outside their doors.

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Philadelphia has 11,000 vacant lots, most of
them derelict. Over the past two decades, local people have constructively redeveloped 1,200 of
these areas into community gardens—converting neighborhood liabilities into neighborhood assets.

Folks get attached to the gardens. In the city,
two blocks away can be an entirely different
neighborhood with its own culture, and the
garden is part of the culture. Unfortunately, upon
cessation a long about property owner shows up, and the people who poured their sweat and money
into the land are out-of-luck.

The Neighborhood Gardens Association works
to avoid this unpleasant scenario. By acquiringproperties or helping other community groups to

When the kids were smaller I

used to feed the family from
the garden,” Green said.

“Now I joke at people
on the block who are less
fortunate than me.”

How does your
garden grow?

This garden of
city gardens usually
is a community response
to the negative impact
of vacant lots near
their homes. When
structures come down,
vacants often become tax
delinquent or do nothing with
their lots, unless property values
improve. Trash accumulates. The neigh-

ors eventually get sick of the ugliness and clean it
up. One thing leads to another, and soon they find
themselves building gardens. The Neighborhood
Gardens Association then helps the neighbors make their improvements permanent.

NGA’s 24 gardens are as diverse as the
neighborhoods where they grow. Some are small,
some large; some are packed with flowers and
others remain families with produce. But all the
gardens have people in common—people who
invest physical and emotional labor, year after year.

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