



CELEBRATING CULTURAL DIVERSITY

DEBBIE SCHIMBERG • JCG Spring 1987

ONE INTRIGUING THING about our community garden, and our whole community, is the fact that almost everyone comes from somewhere else. Most of the gardeners were subsistence farmers before immigrating to Providence, Rhode Island, from such far-off places such as Cambodia, Puerto Rico and Alabama.

Gardening in the city is completely different from farming in the country. In the country, growing food is a way of life. For so many rural people who have ended up in North American cities, their former lives, while poor, had a coherent dignity that is hard to find in Boston, Toronto, Denver or wherever they now call home. In a rural culture, agriculture provides continuity with the past and, through the kids, a link to the future. Now, in the city, through community gardening, immigrants keep up a connection to the past and their traditional rural roots.

American community gardening is a celebration of cultural diversity. Everybody uses inherited ways of planting and some traditional tools and techniques, even if they've learned them from books rather than from grandparents. Sometimes, these differences lead to heartwarming cultural exchanges, both in the garden and the skillet. Other times, the differences prove divisive, resulting in cross-cultural conflict.

In the end, there's the hope that the Hmong man who brought his hoe with him when he was air-lifted from post-war Laos, and the lady from rural North Carolina who plants cotton in her plot, and the intellectual who wants to warn folks about food additives will see – when they all meet face-to-face in the community garden – that they have a tremendous amount in common. 🍷

Cotton grows in Harlem

GERTRUDE RAINEY • JCG 1990

EACH TIME I ENTER 153rd Street garden in Harlem, I have to smile, thinking about Calvin and his mystery plant, and how he kept me guessing all summer long. You know, I believe it's Calvin's way of being remembered by his fellow gardeners.

Calvin was the neighborhood mechanic, a small man in stature with a heart as big as all outdoors. He worked diligently in the garden, always planting, weeding, and choosing his small talk with wisdom, just to make us laugh. One day, I asked him about the strange plants growing in one of his boxes. They were almost two feet tall, and he took extra special care of them. Calvin gave me a whimsical smile and in a dry, humorous voice, replied, "When you see the first flowers, you will know what I planted. After all, you are from the South too, and we never forget what we learned on the farm."

I told him I was born in Miami and my mother was not allowed to have a garden in her backyard, but Calvin couldn't care less. He wouldn't divulge his secret, but he did start giving me hints. I was not one to be outsmarted by "a country boy", as he often called himself, so I did some research in my library. The next time Calvin came by, I told him he had planted okra, proud of what I thought I had discovered.

Calvin gave me a solemn look of disbelief and, nonchalantly said, "You don't eat it, but it is one of life's necessities."

I wanted to bury Calvin in the hole he was digging.

By now, my curiosity overwhelmed me. I consulted with Lydia, another gardener, who was an experienced farmer. Lydia examined the plants and began to laugh uncontrollably. Suspense took its toll – jumping up and down, I kept asking, "What is it? What is it?"

Between laughs, Lydia blurted out the answer. Calvin was growing cotton. With perplexed relief, I joined Lydia on the ground, laughing, pointing, and practically shouting, "Cotton grows in Harlem! Cotton grows in Harlem!"

Next time Calvin came by, the cotton had blossomed and the patch was a sight to behold. I asked him what prompted him to plant cotton and he answered, "I feel like I'm back home. I just wanted to prove that I can do it."

As he spoke, I detected sadness in Calvin's voice. Calvin missed his farm life, and when he recalled some of his happy moments, I sometimes felt something was missing from my life.

Meanwhile the cotton bloomed with mindboggling beauty. Skeptics came to look, and were just as awed and amazed as I was.

Calvin never got to teach me the art of cropping cotton. He passed away last summer. His absence leaves a void in the community, but our many shared tales of Calvin's gardening feats fills that void with joyful memories. 🍷



We never forget
what we learned
on the farm.