

Stewards of the Vacant Lot

By Michael Crewdson

It's a sunny mid-spring afternoon in the Bronx. A sea of green cloaking a vacant lot is punctuated by colorful splashes of blue flax, red clover, and multiflora rose. Chest high masses of milkweed, mugwort, Japanese honeysuckle, and pokeweed look lush contrasting with the earth tones of the Castle Hill Projects that loom in the foreground. It's a beautiful urban pastoral scene, an unexpected diversity of plants offering promises of more vivid colors later in summer.

Artist and botanical expert Leslie Reed, using a Japanese digging knife, carefully removes a curious looking low-lying plant with basil-shaped velvety leaves growing amidst sparkling shards of broken glass. "It's mullein," she explains, "a biennial in its first year." Next season the mullein plant will have a wonderful shaft of yellow flowers that can reach over six feet high, thus lending the plant its other name of Jacob's-staff. Leslie puts the plant complete with its root system into a plastic container and splashes water on it.

Artist Bob Braine has his attentions elsewhere. After filling up a weather balloon with helium from a five-foot-long tank, he is guiding the 8-foot-diameter balloon over the crowns of white mulberry and ailanthus trees. With a remote control device, Bob is clicking infrared photos of the vacant lot from 200 feet above. Photos will reveal the vegetation types that exist on the lot: meadow, marsh, and woodland. But they will also reveal that this lot, on White Plains Road and Randall Avenue, is an island of lush growth in an otherwise arid zone.

Leslie and Bob have made more than a dozen of such pilgrimages to the Castle Hill site. They have adopted it, becoming stewards of an unlikely habitat, a vacant lot. On field trips, they have identified scores of species growing here, from natives like Pennsylvania smartweed, box elder trees, and Harger's goldenrod to exotic species like garlic mustard, Japanese hops, and evening primrose. Concentrating on a 15' by 15' section of the meadow, they conducted a miniature "bioblitz" and identified 57 species. They also conducted geologic surveys, unearthing bricks, concrete with large aggregate, asphalt and other construction rubble that gives the underlying soil its unique characteristics.

The Global Garden

In a small wetland portion of the lot, next to a patch of native jewelweed flanked by impressive stands of the tan reed phragmites, Bob talks about the ephemeral nature of the vacant lot. "A Home Depot or mega church can spring up here overnight," he said. "This lot and the plants that grow here will be gone." The artist has seen some of his favorite vacant lots vanish in the five boroughs, each disappearing with its own unique topography and plant palate.

"This is a self-determined landscape. Unlike a park, there are no overseers," says Bob.

"No one showed up here with a plant list and mulch to improve the soil," says Leslie. "Of course, many of the plants have a strong link with people."

Leslie points to a mass of small plants that resemble clover. “That’s alfalfa. Later in the summer it will have beautiful purple flowers.” The species is a legume that was originally brought to North America from Europe to feed livestock. English plantain, she explains, is abundant on the lot, too. This plant was widely used in Europe as a medicinal plant before arriving on this continent with the first colonists. It was not warmly received by the Native Americans who dubbed it “white’s man’s footsteps” because the low-growing plant followed wherever the Europeans traveled. However, another alien, Leslie’s coveted mullein, was welcomed by Native Americans who used it to cure lung ailments. (They found that the biannual could grow well in the high alkaline environment of shell middens—exactly the conditions of the lot.) Horsetweed, a member of the mint family, is a native plant that was commonly used as a diuretic and to stop cuts from bleeding. This was a plant that the Native Americans presented to the Europeans as a medicinal plant.

“In a sense this lot is a very romantic landscape,” says Bob, “filled with beauty but also history and stories, many of which we’ll never know.” A brief meander through it with Bob and Leslie as guides proves that this lot is not a static place, stories continue to unfold. They point out a disturbed area, where a bulldozer recently dumped a load of rubble on top of milkweed and mugwort plants. On one portion of the meadow, orchard grass from Eurasia, weeping panic grass from South Africa, and native deer-tongue grass all vie for space.

This assortment of plants is not entirely random. Like any garden, the soil conditions, exposure to sun and cold, determine what grows here. And in this respect the lot is like a giant hell strip. Its soil is baked and compacted by the sun in summer and given high alkaline soil by the rubble. These make growing conditions difficult to say the least. “The flora of the vacant lot should be seen as an exquisite representation of the will to survive,” says Bob.

On the Cutting Edge of Gardening

Improbably, the New York City vacant lot is becoming an endangered habitat. It is an environment that has flourished by being ignored. And now, with intensive redevelopment of urban areas, these once neglected spaces are now suddenly sought after as places to build. Vacant lots also can be turned into parks or more formal community gardens. Then, well-intentioned non-native plant eradicators could easily destroy what Bob and Leslie love most about this once forgotten landscape. “The truth is,” says Leslie, “many of these plant species would be regarded as pests and are on noxious plant lists.”

That is why Bob and Leslie are preserving the marginalized plantscape in their own way. They’re paying tribute to it in the form of a Florilegium, a hard bound collection of flower illustrations in the tradition of seventeenth-century botanists. Bob and Leslie painted the illustrations of the plants themselves, and also included more modern touches such as panoramic and infrared photographs of the lot.

To memorialize the geologic specimens, Leslie made plaster casts of bottles, a baseball, bits of rubble and other items they found on the lot. To safeguard representative plant species, they have created a Wardian Case. Also popular in the Victorian era, these proto-terrariums made of glazed glass and set in wood made it possible for plant collectors to bring back species from distant lands on long ocean voyages. “They unleashed a revolution in the mobility of plants,” says Bob. He likes to imagine that some of the plants on the lot once traveled in a wardian case in the Nineteenth Century, the heyday of botanical exploration.

To populate their own *Wardian Case*, Bob and Leslie collected plants from the lot last fall and brought them back to their cozy Brooklyn apartment to overwinter. The two took care of them, employing grow lights and even buying lacewing larvae to combat an infestation of aphids. When spring came, they moved the plants to their roof. “People think weeds are so strong,” says Bob, “but out of their element they’re very fragile. We had to coddle them in order that they survive.”

Once ensconced in its new ornate home, the happily growing plants were transported to their ultimate destination at Wave Hill. And Wave Hill, a vanguard for gardening that celebrates innovation, was a fitting end place for this cutting edge botanical project. As Bob pointed out, the case with a vertical section of Castle Hill flora looks like a green core sample from a lush faraway land. “The plants are from a very particular time and place, almost like a time capsule,” says Bob. “They tell narrative about a moment in our history.”