

# History of Leland Street Community Garden

## Told By Kathleen Robinson

### 1982-2008

#### Chapter One: Before There Was a Garden

When I moved into the Forest Hills neighborhood in the early '80's it was very different than it is today. Many homes were in a deteriorated condition after years of neglect by absentee landlords and poverty stricken homeowners. The neighborhood was part of, or at least on the edge of, a large area of Boston which in the public mind was simply "bad" or "dangerous." For decades it had been assumed by many that no one would live in this area if they had a choice, and the city had invested nothing in it beyond maintaining basic services. It was difficult to sell or buy homes in Forest Hills because it was part of a redlined district where homeowners' insurance was not easily available. Neighborhoods near Forest Hills in Dorchester and Roxbury were experiencing waves of arson as landlords, unable to sell their properties, simply burned them for the insurance money.

In this atmosphere vacant city lots that either never had been built on or that were sites of homes that had burned were virtually worthless. No one considered building new houses here. Many vacant lot owners simply stopped paying taxes to the City and forgot about their properties. Three such abandoned lots occupied the dead end of Leland Street, off Wachusett Street abutting the Forest Hills Cemetery. These parcels had never been built on, probably because Roxbury puddingstone ledge lay close to the surface throughout much of them. They had been used for years as a place to dump construction waste and junk cars. Growing up through the trash was a forest of Japanese Knot-weed, that indestructible plant which, along with cockroaches, will probably inherit most of Boston if a natural or manmade disaster destroys all other life forms. "The Lots," as they were referred to by nearby neighbors, had also become a venue for drinking, drug dealing, and other illegal activity. When I first moved to a nearby house, most neighbors avoided walking into or even near The Lots.

The first step in the long journey of transforming The Lots into The Leland Street Community Garden came when some of the nearby neighbors decided we needed to actually go into them so that those using them for criminal purposes could no

longer have possession by default. A few neighborhood cleanup days were organized and we made a small start at removing the many years worth of trash. I remember that a few times neighbors brought picnics into The Lots. On one of those occasions a young man unknown to us walked past carrying an unboxed television set. He brazenly took it to the cemetery fence and hoisted it over to another young man waiting on the other side. One of the astounded picnickers exclaimed, "So that is the meaning of the term 'to fence'!"

During these early cleanup days in The Lots neighbors began to talk to one another about possible community uses for the space. Exhilarating ideas were floated: a windmill to create a non-grid source of electricity for our neighborhood, or perhaps a well or community greenhouse. Even though property values in Forest Hills and nearby neighborhoods had been stagnant or declining for many years, it was clear in the early '80:s that there was some interest in reviving the area. The City had begun organizing auctions to sell some of the vacant parcels of land it had inherited by default of tax payments. One neighbor, a community organizer working in an arson prevention program, encountered an individual whose property insurance was about to be canceled because of his arson record. He turned up on Leland Street, as it turned out, because he owned the vacant lot to the side of #15 Leland and was considering acquiring The Lots to build condominiums. This increased our sense of urgency. We began to realize that if we wanted The Lots to remain a public open space, we, the neighbors, needed to find a way to own them.

Some of the homeowners and tenants in homes abutting The Lots formed a group to investigate the possibility of purchasing them. We approached Boston Natural Areas Fund (BNAF), then a fledgling land trust organization with the mission of preserving public open space in Boston, to ask for advice. They suggested that they could purchase The Lots and lease them to our community group for a very small dollar amount. (Eventually the arrangement became that we, the community gardeners, could use the space without charge as long as it was maintained as a garden.)

In 1983 BNAF purchased The Lots, ensuring that they would remain "green and open to the public forever."

For the first few years after the BNAF purchase, the work of developing a community garden proceeded rather slowly, in fits and starts. We had more work days to remove trash. We finally got the City to remove the junked cars. We dug

and dug and dug at the tenacious knot-weed. (My son who was a teenager at the time became an obsessive-compulsive knot-weed digger. And apparently knot-weed obsession is a condition which is never outgrown. On a recent visit from his home in California he spent time in Franklin Park digging at the knot-weed which is threatening the Oak forests there.) We even tried to get rid of the knot-weed by weed-whacking it and then covering the stubble with layers of old carpeting. This effort failed because it only encouraged the plant to spread its roots beyond the carpeted area and spring up in spaces which had previously been relatively free of the menace.

The first actual gardening on The Lots began when one neighbor turned over the soil in a spiral pattern in a spot where the knot-weed removal had been relatively successful and planted corn. The following year another neighbor planted herbs--basil, sage, marjoram and lavender--in this spiral. With this delightful innovation the idea of a community herb garden was born. In those early years we also obtained and planted a number of small fruit trees---apple, pear and beach plum. These trees were provided by the Fruition Program of U Mass Extension Service, which was later taken over by the community organization Earthworks. Most of these trees are still living and producing fruit, although few people are aware of them or take advantage of the harvest.

## Chapter Two: Building The Garden 1989-1990

In 1988 development of a community garden on The Lots was given a huge boost when we applied for and, in 1989, received a grant of \$25,000 from the Grassroots Program of the City of Boston Public Facilities Department. This was federal money for improvement projects in "inner city" areas and administered by the City. Our proposal called for the building of a fieldstone wall to separate the parking area at the end of Leland Street from the Garden, removal of dead and weed trees, planting of specimen trees and shrubs, construction of cobblestone herb beds in the celtic cross pattern, building raised beds for plant propagation and/or vegetables, and a three-bin compost system. We received the Grassroots grant in 1989 with the stipulation that the plan must be realized and the entire grant spent in one year. This initiated months of hectic activity in which more neighbors than ever enthusiastically participated.

During the spring, summer, and fall of 1989 and 1990 workdays were held almost weekly. Many hours were spent sifting soil to remove rocks and glass and trucking leaf mold from the Forest Hills Cemetery. The front wall (of rip-rap design), the cobblestone herb beds, the raised beds, and a stone wall at the back of the White Garden were built. Many shrubs and perennial plants were planted. Neighbors oversaw grading work by a back-hoe owner and tree work by licensed arborists. During the year of garden building on Leland Street activity was so intense that a monthly newsletter called The Lots Review and edited by a neighbor who was a law student was distributed to all neighbors to let everyone know what was going on.

One reason that so many neighbors -- often 10 or 15 including several children on a given workday--got involved in building the Leland Street Garden was that they had helped to plan it. Shortly after we received the Grassroots grant, a local landscape architect was hired to help create a detailed plan. She led several community meetings in which neighbors were invited to submit their own drawings or written lists of ideas for the Garden; and then she consolidated many of these ideas into a drawing which became the blueprint for the Leland Street Garden. The decision to build an open community space with garden areas jointly maintained, rather than individual plots, was made partly because the ledge throughout much of the space made it infeasible to have many vegetable-growing plots. Also, a number of neighborhood kids had been playing in The Lots for years and were active participants in the garden building. It didn't seem right to fence them out and give access only to plot holders. In the design meetings many neighbors expressed desire for a lawn area where kids could play and we could hold neighborhood parties and events.

Although enthusiasm in the neighborhood for creating a community garden was high after we received the Grassroots grant, support for the plan was not absolutely unanimous. A small minority of residents in abutting homes (actually two or three people) opposed the idea of a public open space. From their point of view, creating an open garden would only encourage the "wrong kind of people" to come and would make the neighborhood "more dangerous." They felt the garden should not be open to the public but rather fenced in with access given only to designated gardeners. Though only a very few neighbors held this view, they were adamant and tried hard to stop the project. They discovered in researching official City maps that Leland Street technically went all the way back to the cemetery fence--even though it had probably never actually extended across The Lots. Since it was

illegal to build a wall across a street, they claimed they could legally prevent our construction of the wall planned as a demarcation between Leland Street and the Garden.

Because of the threats of the minority of obstructionists, we changed the plan, deciding to build not a vertical wall but instead a "rip-rap wall" by laying large fieldstones flat on a graded rise at the end of Leland Street and planting low-growing ground cover plants between the stones. This was one of the first garden construction projects to be completed; and I remember how elated we 10 or so neighbors who worked on it felt when it was done. Our garden really was going to happen!

Throughout the garden building process there was a sense of empowerment. Time and again we were amazed at how quickly four or five people working together could complete jobs that were overwhelming for one or two working alone.

By the time of the Grand Opening party for the Leland Street Community Garden in June 1990, those few neighbors who had opposed it had moved away.

### Chapter Three: The Opening Years of the Garden 1990-1991

By June of 1990 we had spent the Grassroots grant money and the garden building phase was mostly finished. A Grand Opening Party was held complete with a cake decorated with edible flowers and tea from garden herbs. Neighbors who had worked hard building Leland Street Community Garden invited friends and family members to celebrate our accomplishments. Mary Milligan, the president of the New England Herb Society, who had given much advice and encouragement and donated plants from her own garden, attended. Bud Hanson, president of the Forest Hills Cemetery, gave a short thank-you speech and promised continuing cooperation with the gardeners. The star of the day was a six year old neighbor who had devoted many hours to the garden building and planting. He was enthusiastically applauded when he announced proudly and somewhat incredulously that we had a tree in our garden which made pears and that he had planted some plants which would soon be making free tomatoes for all of us.

In that first official growing season the children who had worked consistently along with the adults to build the Garden were given their own bed and asked what

they would like to plant. "Flowers for our mothers" was the answer ; and so, in an oval shaped bed near the front of the Garden, six or seven children scattered the contents of many envelopes of zinnia, marigold, and sunflower seeds. This Children's Cutting Garden flourished beautifully , and its creators cut many bouquets -- although sometimes they got carried away with playing in the Garden and didn't get the cut flowers home to Mom before they wilted. Kids planted this flower garden yearly for several years. It is still a part of the Leland Street Garden, but now the growth of nearby trees has greatly reduced the area suitable for growing annual flowers, and in recent years fewer kids have been involved in the planting and fewer neighbors cut bouquets to bring inside.

In the second year that children planted their flower garden a complete destruction of the young plants was narrowly averted by a seemingly miraculous event. About three weeks after the seed planting, I noticed one morning that the tiny seedlings were covered with hungry black aphids. Though this was very disappointing--heartbreaking really--I thought that by the time we figured out how to kill the aphids the tiny plants would be gone. "Oh well," I concluded, " I guess we all have to learn that Nature doesn't always share our priorities." The next morning, however, when I walked out to view the destruction, I found not an aphid in sight and the tiny seedlings recovering from their trauma. What had happened?! Closer inspection revealed two praying mantises licking their chops. I thanked them profusely and had the distinct impression that Someone or Something--a Garden Angel maybe?--was overseeing this special place.

In the second official growing season of the Garden, 1991, The Massachusetts Horticultural Society divided its prestigious statewide Community Garden of the Year award between the Leland Street Community Garden and another new garden in Fitchburg. This was the first of many awards that our Garden was to receive in the next decades--including two First Place Golden Trowels in Mayor Menino's annual Garden Contest and two Readers' Choice Awards in the community garden category from the Jamaica Plain Gazette.

#### Chapter Four: Fun, Flowers and Food In Our Garden 1991-2008

In the nearly two decades since the Leland Street Garden's official opening, herbs, vegetables and flowers have flourished during every growing season--and they have been available for everyone in the neighborhood to harvest and enjoy. During

every spring, summer and fall neighbors and friends from other parts of Jamaica Plain have come together on biweekly workdays to plant, water, weed, prune, turn compost and maintain paths. An all volunteer Steering Committee made up of anyone willing to come to the monthly meetings has guided operations. In the mid-nineties neighborhood beekeeper Mike Graney began keeping hives in the Garden and donating the proceeds of the honey sales to its support. In 2003 some relatively new neighbors created a new garden area (called the Peace Garden) and a path on the vacant lot between Leland Street Garden and the Parkman Playground.

In addition to all the gardening and honey production, the original vision of the Garden as a neighborhood gathering place was realized with many community parties, concerts, picnics and children's events, as well as yoga and tai chi classes, herb workshops, and lots of games of croquet, badminton, and bocce.

Several of the seasonal celebrations in the Garden have become annual events. The last Sunday of August has been Honey Day for 13 or 14 years. Hundreds of visitors have come on Honey Days at Leland Street Garden to buy honey and enjoy refreshments made with garden herbs, mead made from garden honey, live music, and garden tours. (One year, thanks to master chef Mike Graney, Honey Day even included a prix fixe dinner at the Dogwood Cafe featuring Leland Street herbs or honey or both in every course.) In a very different season the heartiest of Forest Hills neighbors have celebrated the Winter Solstice, December 21, every year for many years by lighting our Garden with luminarias-- votive candles in sand-filled paper bags-- creating a truly magical atmosphere. We drink hot cider or mulled wine and sing together to call back the sun. The candles usually stay lit all night.

A third seasonal celebration is fast becoming an annual tradition. For the past three years a Children's Halloween Party, organized by neighborhood parents, has filled the Garden with little ghosts, fairies, frogs, princesses and pumpkins playing games, bobbing for apples and taking turns being blindfolded and trying to break open the candy-filled pumpkin pinata.

I have enjoyed gardening my whole life--ever since I worked with my father in our victory garden plot in the 1940's--and I can honestly say that gardening with my neighbors in the Leland Street Community Garden has been the most pleasurable of all my gardening experiences. As for the community parties and events in the Garden, I have attended most of them and I rank them among the most fun memories

of my many years. Three Garden events stand out in my memory. The first is the Ninja Turtle Party, conceived entirely by children who helped build the Garden, where all the guests came dressed as their favorite Ninja. The second outstanding memory is a summer Tea Party (sometimes remembered as the Hat Party because the invitations said "Hats Required, Shoes Optional") in which Steering Committee members circulated among the guests with trays of savory and sweet goodies made with herbs and vegetables from the Garden while another neighbor sat under the apple tree playing classical guitar music. The third event in my "best memory" list is a Treasure Hunt with hidden poetic clues leading us from one garden plant to another--a delightful way to be introduced to the Garden's many treasures.

### Chapter Five: The Garden in Recent Years

During the latter years of the 1990's and the early years of the 21st Century the neighborhood around the Leland Street Garden changed dramatically. As home values escalated exponentially, the Forest Hills neighborhood became much more prosperous but also increasingly unstable. Turnover among neighbors was rapid as homeowners were able to sell houses for several times what they had paid for them and tenants were forced out by ever-increasing rents and condo conversion. Many people moved into the neighborhood, enjoyed and helped maintain the Garden for a season or two or three and then moved away. It became difficult for the small all-volunteer Steering Committee to make sure that all the new neighbors even knew of the Garden's existence and that their participation was needed and welcomed.

Ironically the very success of the Leland Street Garden contributed to the soaring real estate values which destabilized the neighborhood: On several occasions I met real estate agents showing the Garden to potential home buyers, using the beauty and peace of this public open space as part of their justification for the over-inflated asking price of a nearby home.

As the 2009 growing season approaches, it seems to those of us who have volunteered as the Garden Steering Committee for the past few years that a new vision for our Garden is needed. Trees, shrubs and weeds--including our old enemy Knot-weed--have kept growing vigorously in recent years, but the number of neighbors who share a vision of what the Garden means to our community has dwindled. During the past couple of growing seasons the biweekly workdays to maintain the Garden have often consisted of one or two people, rather than the five or six workers which can be so much fun and is so empowering. Also, fewer people



have been willing to participate in the monthly Steering Committee meetings to assess and address Garden needs, and fewer neighborhood events have been organized.

Public open space in a City such as Boston is a precious commodity. As the history of the Leland Street Community Garden demonstrates, it can go a long way toward making a neighborhood feel like a community. But unless alot of us value our public open space enough to maintain and use it, it cannot be sustained. Now is the time for many of us to work together to assure that the Garden's joyous history is continued throughout coming decades.