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News that Inspires

See the Seeds of Change Grown by One Bronx Woman

by Chris Peak

The first plant that changed my life was a tomato," says Karen Washington, a black urban farmer in the Bronx. "It was the one fruit that I used to hate." But after watching one that she'd grown shift in hue from green to yellow to red and taking a bite of it, she was instantly hooked. "When I tasted that tomato, when it was red and it was ripe, and I picked it off the vine, [it]…changed my world because I never tasted anything so good, so sweet. I wanted to grow everything."

For a quarter century, all manner of trees and flowers, fruits and vegetables, have thrived across abandoned lots in the Bronx because of Washington. Deemed "the queen of urban farming," she's an African-American woman who's dedicated her life to greening New York City's poorest borough. Since 1985, Washington has assisted dozens of neighborhoods build their own community gardens, taught workshops on farming and promoted racial diversity in agriculture.

Your food "is not from a grocery store, it's not from a supermarket. It's grown in the ground," she says. "You have to understand where your food comes from. It gives you power."

A lifelong New Yorker, Washington grew up in a public housing project on the Lower East Side. She moved up to the Bronx in 1985 and bought herself a newly built home, which she viewed as, "an opportunity, as a single parent with two children, to live the American dream." While some gentrification occurred, other parts of the low-income neighborhood looked "like a warzone," dotted with abandoned buildings. Some of Washington's windows looked onto an empty lot filled with garbage and rusting cars.

One day, she noticed a man walking by with a shovel and a pick — an unusual sight in Gotham's concrete jungle. "What are you doing here?" Washington asked. He told her he was thinking about creating a community garden. "I said, 'Can I help?'"

"I had no idea about gardening. I didn't have a green thumb," she recalls. Despite that, a city program that leased undeveloped lots for $1 gave Washington and her neighbors lumber, dirt and seeds, "and we gave them power — muscle power — and hopes and dreams to turn something that was devastating and ugly into something that was beautiful." Within days, the first seeds of the Garden of Happiness and Washington's lifelong activism were beginning to sprout.

Ever since, Washington has helped others in the Bronx locate empty neighborhood spaces

that are prime real estate for something to blossom and led volunteers through the process of opening a community garden — earning her respect throughout the Big Apple and beyond. She holds positions on almost every board imaginable, including the New York Community Gardening Coalition, Just Food and the New York Botanical Garden. “Can you imagine, a little girl from the projects on the board of the New York Botanical Garden?” she asks in disbelief, her smiling face framed by her dreadlocks.

And then there was the time she met First Lady Michelle Obama. Washington describes feeling, “the elation of the spirits of my ancestors. I just felt them clapping and cheering, because here I was, a black woman, standing in the presence of the First Lady.”

Blooming with daffodils, tulips and hyacinth, the original purpose of Washington’s first community garden — the Garden of Happiness — and others like it was “beautification,” Washington says, “about taking away the garbage” from a disadvantaged minority community. Only later did she start to think about greenery beyond being decoration or as a food source. “When I first started initially in the food movement, I was focused on growing food. It wasn’t until I was in that community garden that I started hearing social issues like low employment, poor health, people who couldn’t afford rents,” Washington says. She learned she had to “feed people’s body and mind.”

To promote equity and fairness, she’s recently been focusing on boosting the number of African Americans in agriculture through BUGs — or Black Urban Growers. The most recent agricultural census figures show 55,346 farmers in the Empire State are white and only 113 are black.

It’s always been a dream of Washington’s to purchase land upstate for a farm, but every time she counted all the zeros in the real estate listings, it seemed impossible. Drawing on her connections, Washington met a businessman interested in launching a farming co-operative in Chester, N.Y. They started growing veggies on three acres of black dirt in January. Located just an hour from the city, Washington hopes the rural-urban relationship will help African-Americans have a better understanding of how food systems work and have a chance to participate.

“Farming’s in our DNA, but [we] never have that conversation, always being pushed to the side as the consumer or the person with their hand out, never the type with their hand in the conversation,” Washington says. “There’s no agriculture without culture, so having people understand that slavery was part of our life, it doesn’t define who we are. … [We’re] trying to have people understand that. Don’t be afraid to put your hands in the soil, don’t be afraid to garden or farm because that’s who you are.”