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in the most inspiring way." —Robert Rodale

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 36 **PEOPLE**


By Zazel Lovén

**COMMUNITY GARDEN** BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

On a warm evening last August, rain threatened, but that didn't prevent the residents of this Brooklyn neighborhood from coming to a party held in their honor at the 1100 Block Bergen Street Community Garden. The occasion was the dedication of a new rainwater-harvesting system, toolshed, and rain garden donated by the *Organic Gardening WaterWorks* project and New York City's Council on the Environment.

The evening brought much of the community to the garden, as church ladies mingled with small children, local politicians worked the crowd, and garden coordinators Yvonne Harris and Hazel Hurley made sure newer residents felt welcome to join in the festivities (and eventually join the garden). As guests enjoyed food prepared by a local restaurant, Harris called everyone together and introduced a surprise speaker. The DJ lowered the music as a woman who was about to mesmerize the crowd stepped up to the microphone.

Sophie Johnson told the story of the garden: 25 years ago, she had walked past these lots filled with rubble and garbage. In a flash, she saw a community garden there, but with her neighborhood in decline, the task of getting from urban blight to verdant plot was daunting. Everyone was moved by her stories of the many volunteers who cleaned up the large lot, maintained it, and then worked their plots until vegetables and flowers grew from the newly healthy soil. Many gardeners toiled away at night, determined to keep this pride of the neighborhood thriving

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despite family obligations and tough work schedules.

Though they hadn't seen each other in years, Johnson was quick to honor Harris, who has made it her life's work never to let the neighborhood turn away from this gathering spot. Keeping the garden an integral part of the community is what has made it flourish, says Harris, adding that a strong volunteer base and knowing how to get help from many different sources are critical, too. An open-gate policy allows local churches to regularly hold events in the garden, and more weddings have been held under the weeping willow tree than anyone can remember.

One of the oldest extant community gardens in the city, Bergen Street was the first to put in a rain-barrel system. Almost 25 years later, the number-one item on Harris's wish list for the garden was a cistern to replace the unsightly barrels falling apart with age. And there is always more to be done: The volunteer group has gathered to lay the plans that would lead them into the next 25 years of urban greening in their ever-changing neighborhood.

To learn more about the gardens in the WaterWorks project and how you can get involved, visit OrganicGardening.com.



Brooklyn beauty: Much more than a tree grows in this diverse garden, which will now be watered from a new rain-collection system. Founder Sophie Johnson, coordinator Yvonne Harris, and volunteer Joey Cruz celebrate the christening of the cistern.

