



Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (1850-1950), large American cities like New York City were often considered unhealthy places to live due to the increase in emissions from factories and industries. This was coupled with the growing number of immigrants coming from Europe, which caused a problem of overpopulation. Though factories and industry provided many work opportunities for people, they also created many social and environmental problems.

Reformers during this time, including members of the Garden Club of America (GCA), attempted to improve the effects of industry and commerce through beautification projects. One such reformer, [Fannie Griscom Parsons](#), took a slightly different approach. In 1902 she started one of the first children's gardens in the United States, providing food and gathering space for the children of her New York City neighborhood, many of whom had immigrant parents. Formerly a dumping ground, Parsons used the help of local residents to transform the vacant lot into garden plots. Children helped to grow corn, butter beans, peas, radishes, turnips, lettuce, and buckwheat.



[Dewitt Clinton Park](#) children's garden plots in October, 1909. Images from the [Thomas Warren Sears Collection](#), Archives of American Gardens, Smithsonian Institution.



Today, many urban residents continue to use gardens to benefit their communities. For example, [Jones Valley Urban Farm](#) in Birmingham, Alabama (pictured below) is in some ways a contemporary version of Parson's farm.



Jones Valley Urban Farm, Birmingham, Alabama. May 2009. Garden Club of America Collection, Archives of American Gardens, Smithsonian Institution. Heather McWwane, photographer.



Beginning in 1975, residents of West Philadelphia decided to transform a vacant lot – where row houses and a dry cleaner once stood – into gardens. With the help of the Pennsylvania Horticulture Society, they created the community space now known as [Aspen Farms](#). During the 1980s, [students from the University of Pennsylvania](#) worked with neighborhood gardeners, many of whom were African American, to create a design for a community space in this garden, transforming it into “an oasis in the neighborhood offering the community a place to grow foods and knowledge.”



Aspen Farms Community Garden, September 2004. Garden Club of America Collection, Archives of American Gardens, Smithsonian Institution. Ann Reed, photographer.

Gardens and Communities: Through the Lens



Smithsonian Gardens

In cities all over the United States, youths and adults alike are engaged in gardening projects in their community that are not so different from the early work of the Garden Club of America. For example, youths in Washington, DC helped turn an asphalt lot into a dynamic green space for adults and children in conjunction with [City Blossoms](#). In Detroit, youths are some of the key people helping their community by growing and selling fresh fruit and vegetables on what used to be vacant lots as a part of [Earthworks Urban Farm](#).



[Las Parcelas](#), pictured here in 1995, celebrates Puerto Rican culture in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Ira Beckhoff, photographer. Garden Club of America Collection, Archives of American Gardens, Smithsonian Institution.



In 1914, members of the **Garden Club of America** (GCA) began photographing gardens all across the United States to **document** those they considered important. They collected these images and eventually created an **archive** of them. (This collection became the foundation for the Archives of American Gardens at Smithsonian Gardens). Since gardens and landscapes are constantly changing from season to season, owner to owner, these photographs provide a record of that change over time. By comparing images, future generations can better understand how differences in styles, uses, and meanings of gardens and landscapes change. They can also inspire design ideas. Today, members of the GCA continue to photograph gardens, interview the owners, and accumulate information about gardens to add to the Archives of American Gardens. But with so many gardens and parks, they can't take pictures of them all. They could use your help! What places are important to you? What do you want people of the future to remember about your neighborhood? What would you photograph?

Part 1 of this lesson requires you to consider the **neighborhood** and **community** where you live. Do you have gardens, parks or outdoor spaces in which you enjoy spending time? Which are your favorites? What outdoor places are important to you? Document the gardens and parks in your neighborhood so they won't be forgotten. Remember to pay particular attention to gardens and places that others might not notice. You can upload them to the Smithsonian Gardens' Flickr or Facebook page to share them.

Then, think about which of these places could be preserved or improved in your community. Working in teams, draft a plan for a community garden in Part 2 of this lesson, using your neighborhood for inspiration.

“Without the garden, the landscape, even the imaginary landscape, is incomplete. As we now visualize it, the garden stands for a particular kind of experience of the environment, essential to a fuller understanding of ourselves...”

- J.B. Jackson, *“Nearer than Eden, 1980*



Vocabulary

- Archive
- Community
- Community garden
- Discipline
- Document
- Garden
- Garden Club of America
- Geospatial
- Neighborhood

Length of activity: 90-120 minutes +

Age: 8-13

Learning Goals:

- Develop problem solving and critical thinking skills
- Practice negotiation and collaboration as part of a team
- Practice public speaking and communication skills
- Develop an awareness of the importance and meaning of the neighborhood and develop a geographical perspective
- Develop an awareness of history and historical perspective by being actively involved in documentation that begins at a small scale and branches out to larger ideas

National Education Standards:

- **Arts:** [NA-VA.K-4.4](#) Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures; [NA-VA.K-4.6](#) Making Connections between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines
- **Language Arts:** [NL-ENG.K-12.4](#) Communication Skills; [NL-ENG.K-12.5](#) Communication Strategies; [NL-ENG.K-12.8](#) Developing Research Skills; [NL-ENG.K-12.11](#) Participating in Society; [NL-ENG.K-12.6](#) Applying Knowledge
- **Social Studies:** [NSS-C.5-8.1](#) Civic Life, Politics, and Government; [NSS-C.5-8.5](#) Roles of the Citizen; [NSS-G.K-12.1](#) The World in Spatial Terms; [NSS-G.K-12.2](#) Places and Regions; [NSS-G.K-12.5](#) Environment and Society; [NSS-G.K-12.6](#) Uses of Geography
- **Visual Arts:** [NA-VA.5-8.4](#) Understanding the Visual Arts in Relation to History and Cultures; [NA-VA.5-8.6](#) Making Connections Between Visual Arts and Other Disciplines

What you'll need:

- Map of your neighborhood for each participant. This can be downloaded and printed from Google Maps (www.google.com/maps) or drawn after your excursions
- Copies of the “Guided Walk Questions” and “Community Improvement” sheets (included in activity)
- Camera and/or sketch pad to photograph or draw what you see.
- scenario activity sheet (included in activity)
- pencils
- paper



Activity: Part 1

Document your community's gardens!

Be Prepared! What to do *before* your documentation trip:

1. *Mapping your place.* Choose a part of your city, town, or neighborhood to search for gardens. Draw a map of the area you will explore or download and print one from Google Maps by searching for a nearby address or point of interest.
2. *Create a story map.* Once you have a map, use it to plan the areas you will walk to. Mark it with way points your family or classmates recognize. Highlight your route using a pen, pencil, or highlighter. Don't forget, there might be interesting gardens in your own backyard!
3. *What to bring:* a pen or pencil, a copy of the "Guided Walk Questions" sheet, your map, camera and/or a note pad to record what you see. Teachers or adults could also bring a tape recorder or note book to record conversations with gardeners or community members you talk to. Remember to ask permission before recording or documenting a conversation.

Let's Get Moving! Discovering your Garden Treasures

1. Following the route you planned on your map, write down your observations about the plants, buildings, and environment around you. Use the "Guided Walk Questions" sheet to help you.
2. Look at yards, window boxes, and planters to see how others have created gardens in their spaces. What do you see? What do you smell? What do you hear? Who do you meet? Who owns the garden? If you see someone working in their garden, remember to always ask permission before taking a picture or going onto their property. Remember, a garden can come in many different shapes and sizes...
3. Each time you find an interesting garden or a park, mark its location on your map with a number.
4. At each garden or place you document, take a picture and/or draw a sketch of the area. Record the number of pictures you take.
5. If you meet someone working in their garden, ask him or her about it. Why did they plant a garden? What kinds of plants are they growing and why?

After Your Trip:

1. *Questions for discussion and reflection:* Take a moment to think about the places you saw. What kinds of places did you find? What makes them different or similar? How do pictures help us document our environments for future generations? What would you want people 100 years from now to remember about the place where you live?



Activity: Part 1

2. Posting your archive: The collection of photographs, drawings, charts, and notes you have collected is now your own archive of the places you visited. Log on to www.gardens.si.edu and follow the link to Smithsonian Gardens' Flickr or Facebook page for instructions on how to upload your pictures. Don't forget to label them!
 - Look at what types of gardens others have posted. Where are they from? How do they compare to yours?
3. As a writing exercise, write brief captions for each image describing the garden and your experience finding it.
 - How to write a caption: each image should have a descriptive caption that notes the specific location in the garden or on the property, prominent features, names of plants, garden structures, what is nearby, in the background, etc. The more information you provide, the more it will help future researchers understand and interpret the design, history, and use of the garden more accurately.
4. Label your gardens on a digital or printed map.
5. Using your responses from the "Guided Walk Questions" sheet, fill out the "Community Improvement Chart." Present your ideas to your class.
6. For the teacher: If you have more time, this activity can be expanded upon for different classroom settings and age groups:
 - Older students could interview willing community members (neighbor, shopkeeper, etc.) and ask them what they would do to improve the community. What would they do? Why? Compare your answers.
 - Use this activity to supplement a history or social studies lesson on the industrial development of American cities. What were the costs and benefits to people economically and environmentally? How did different groups (garden club members, workers, consumers, and factory owners, for example) view industry? How did community gardens affect the morale and health of urban citizens?
 - For an art class, have students sketch a plant, tree, or street scene to practice perspective drawing. Or, have them design their own garden for a space they found.
 - Consider having students write a poem about their environment, one of their favorite objects they found, or something that causes a visceral reaction while looking at gardens.
 - *See Part 2 of this lesson:* Have students work in groups to design a garden or community space, or propose a solution to an area in their neighborhood.

Guided Walk Questions

1. What is found immediately outside your doorway? Down the street? Are there gardens, parks, or any other green spaces where people can gather and enjoy nature?
2. Using your map, each time you find an interesting plant, mark its location on the map and write 3-5 words to describe its color, shape, and size. What kinds of trees or plants do you see?
3. How many different kinds of plants can you find? Create a chart listing the flowers, trees and shrubs you find on your walk. Make a column for common names, Latin names, brief descriptions, and where these plants are located. If you have a GPS, you can mark the GPS information on your chart.
4. How many trees are in your yard? How many on your street? On your block?
5. Is there anything else you notice? Benches? Billboards? Place them on your observation chart.

Community Improvement Chart

Think about the walk you just took. List three things you saw that you liked and would want to preserve. They can be plants, buildings, gardens, or other objects you encountered.

1.

2.

3.

List three things that you would change or improve. Are there areas that could be cleaned up and beautified? Would you install a garden in your neighborhood? Would you recommend planting a tree? What other beautification efforts can you think of?

1.

2.

3.



Activity: Part 2

1. Students should divide into groups (how many will depend upon the size of the class).
2. Hand out the scenario worksheet below to each group and describe the situation to students.
3. Have students work in teams to propose a solution to the problem presented in the scenario.
4. Students can present their plan to the class and respond to questions about it.
5. Alternate option: choose a real space in the neighborhood around your school or home and modify the scenario below to fit that space. Have students research the history of the area, the needs and assets of the community, and connect them to lessons in history, civics, and/ or math and science by measuring spaces, choosing plants, and learning about the soil (see *Gardens Through Your Lens: Part 1* for inspiration).

Scenario:

You are part of a team that has been asked by a small group of local residents to create a plan for a community garden on a vacant lot in an urban neighborhood (see map below). They want a place to grow fresh vegetables for their families. Previously, there was a grocery store and small factory on the lot which have been torn down. An abandoned house still stands on the lot. Another group of residents are opposed or indifferent to the idea of creating a garden on this lot. They would rather see new businesses (many residents now have to travel very far to get to a grocery store), housing, and developments that would bring jobs to their community. Some think community gardens are unattractive and will not last long because people will lose interest. They also wonder how ground pollution from the former factory might affect any fruits or vegetables that are grown there.

Your mission is to:

1. Explain community gardening so that residents can make an informed decision about whether or not it will work for their neighborhood.
2. Create a plan for this lot that addresses the concerns of local residents as well as your ideal garden space. Use your experience from Part 1 of this lesson for inspiration.

To help you start thinking about this, learn more about community gardening using this resource from the American Community Gardening Association: <http://communitygarden.org/learn/>

Site Map of an Urban Neighborhood

