

# YONNETTE FLEMING

*Green-thumbed foodie makes the human garden grow*

BY SHAVANA ABRUZZO

**G**ood food sparkplug Yonnette Fleming made the unthinkable happen when she turned a deadly dumping ground in Bedford-Stuyvesant into a flourishing farmer's market, complete with educational, recreational, and spiritual programs for neighbors who once feared to walk by the disaster site.

The community organizer wanted to cultivate healthy and sustainable food choices in her neighborhood, having been raised in a farm-friendly Guyanese family that grew its own food.

But she faced an uphill battle after gaining permission from the city in 2009 to begin work on the eyesore at Clifton Place and Marcy Avenue, next to the Hattie Carthan Community Garden where the foodie was a member and vice president.

Drug paraphernalia, mattresses, old boilers, stray bullets—even dead dogs—littered the abandoned lot, out of which Fleming and garden volunteers lugged out seven containers of trash with a force which remains a mystery to her.

"I don't know what was driving me to do it, all I know was that it needed to be done," she says.

They called the plot the Hattie Carthan Community Farmer's Market after the late environmentalist who planted more than 1,500 trees in the area. Then, Fleming began to sow the seeds of her vision to unite residents on their common need for sustenance.

"We wanted a food market that told the legitimate story of food, not lily-white food in fancy packages," she says. "But food recently harvested, possibly with some dirt."

The back-breaking work has reaped sweet rewards: kids, who once spent their food stamps on junk food at the local bodega now buy fresh produce at the market, and even help out—though sometimes with mixed feelings!

"One boy helper hid whenever his school friends walked by because he thought it wasn't cool to be gardening," remembers Fleming. The child, she says, ended up being an outreach liaison for the market, a vital resource that has distributed more than 40,000 pounds of produce to a community dubbed a fresh



Photo by Stefano Giovannini

food desert by the government—much of it grown in the adjacent garden.

That delightful sanctuary of fig, sour cherry, and other fruit trees, is splashed with dozens of verdant plots blooming with eggplants, melons, Egyptian onions, turnips, and amaranth grain, all of them lovingly nurtured by green-thumbed members, such as Leon Simmons.

The retired forklift operator donates his surplus beans, corn, tomatoes, potatoes, and peanuts to local senior centers, and credits Fleming with uplifting the green spaces with rainwater harvesting capabilities, a children's learning garden,

greenhouses, an elaborate composting system, and chicken coops—in addition to creating an urban farm and a second farmer's market! Another popular Fleming project, he adds, is the new herb garden where Russian sage, lavender and rosemary rise lushly alongside organic elephant garlic, rue, and 70 other flavorful varieties.

"Yonnette is helping out the neighborhood a lot," says Simmons. "She's an asset because she takes care of everything."

Folks are also harvesting benefits through Fleming's gardening and nutrition workshops, cooking demonstra-

## BIO FILE

**NEIGHBORHOOD:** Bedford-Stuyvesant.

**OCCUPATION:** Urban farmer and agro-ecology educator.

**COMPANY:** Hattie Carthan Community Garden-Farm School New York City.

**CLAIM TO FAME:** "Cultivating community from the ground up."

**FAVORITE BROOKLYN PLACE:** Hattie Carthan Community Garden.

**WOMAN I ADMIRE:** "My grandmother Geraldine King, an eternal ally whose active, lively hands brought beauty to all things she touched."

**MOTTO:** "Who can afford to live without beauty? It graces us with joy and lights the path to a meaningful existence."

tions, and international food festivals, in addition to such welcome initiatives as fresh food delivery to home-bound seniors, fitness classes, a woman's conferences, and a youth corps. The bustling green spaces provide area children with a healthy outlet, according to Boys and Girls High School student Deanna King, 16, who has grown pumpkins and radishes there, become a fan of sorrel juice, and tuned her mom on to sage potatoes.

"Ms. Fleming has shown kids that there's a way out of the violence happening around them, and that this is the place to relax, have fun, and know that somebody will always be there for them," says the budding gastronome.

Word of blossoming Bedford-Stuyvesant has even reached the United Nations. Delegates from 20 countries once stopped by the garden to learn about urban agriculture, prompting Rokhaya Deba Fall of Senegal to marvel, "New York has a different face than the tall buildings—it's the face of many engaged people."

Gratitude for that bill of health goes in large part to good-food gladiators such as Yonnette Fleming, who accepts the honor with a pinch of salt: "I am a small speck in this whole chain," she says. "It's not about me, it's about all of us."