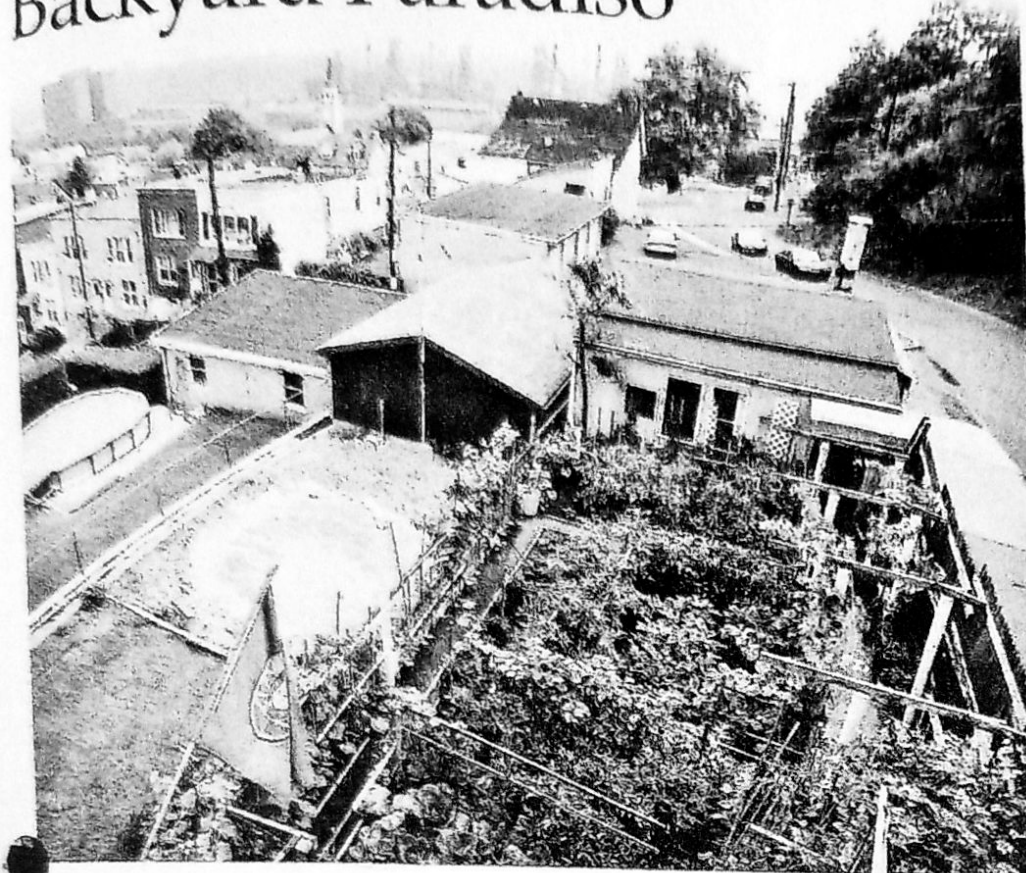


Backyard Paradiso



Photos by John Kish IV

Southside backyards once boasted countless gardens which provided families with fresh vegetables in the first fifty years of the last century. Some gardens still exist in one form or another (above).

In 2002, this writer set out to locate South Bethlehem's famed ethnic gardens—at first sight, none seemed to exist. Many backyards had suddenly and victoriously yielded to the latest weed of the millennium—the parking lot.

A second look five years later revealed new perspectives and a few discoveries.

Ethnic Gardens—A Noble History

Pre-WWI immigrants were attracted to job openings when Bethlehem Steel committed to government contracts. Arriving in South Bethlehem, immigrants brought bits of their homeland in the form of seeds they smuggled in their luggage or had acquired by mail.

These immigrants created traditional lush vegetable gardens with the skill and variety recalled in their native lands.

The opportunity to "grow" must have seemed like Paradise to them. In early spring, they nurtured vegetable seeds which germinated on windowsills in very conceivable container holding Southside soil laden with coal dust.

The backyard garden was cultivated throughout the growing season; vegetables were eaten fresh or canned.

Long work shifts kept many husbands

away from home while their spouses took up the slack—raising their children, preparing meals and hanging wash to dry on ropes. Returning home, husbands tended the garden in solace without the noise and calamity of domestic strife.

Anatomy of the Ethnic Garden

Space-conscious immigrants valued their long, narrow backyards, not to be

wasted on parking lots or swimming pools (virtually unknown at that time).

After fencing their backyard, earth-filled garden beds were created by raising planks on either side of the path.

Every inch of available soil was used to maximize yield of vegetables and fruits. Fruit trees were grown near arbors made of "found" lumber which supported white and red grape vines.

In summer months, Greeks, Italians and Portuguese enjoyed figs from imported trees; in the winter, they wrapped the trees like mummies to protect the tender trunks from freezing.

Other nationalities enjoyed cherry, apple, peach and plum trees—their fruit used as fillings for kiffles, pies and strudel or preserves and marmalades.

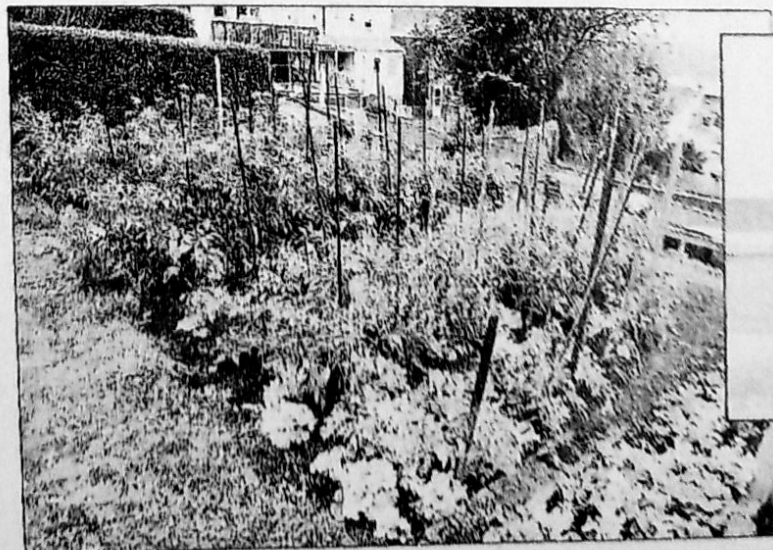
Tomatoes ranged in sizes from small cherries and plums to the hefty beefsteaks and Coracao de Boi (ox hearts).

Cabbage provided sauerkraut while cucumbers were grown for pickles. Summer-grown vegetables included: vining peas, fava beans and squash; celery, Brussels sprouts, broccoli, sweet or hot peppers; mints, basil, thyme, marjoram, dill, caraway, anise, rosemary, sage and flat leaf parsley.

Root vegetables included onions, carrots, beets, radishes and garlic.

Old-fashioned flower varieties featured zinnias, petunias, bleeding hearts, four o'clocks, asters, gladiolas, geraniums, chrysanthemums, carnations and cannas—either grown in the garden or in decorative concrete urns.

Privets, whose intoxicating white flowers heralded the heat of summer, were sculpted as hedges or creative shapes—poor man's topiary which rivaled many foreign estates.



Larry Steixner is a first-generation German-American.

At his E. Sixth St. backyard, Larry Steixner, 82, has cultivated a vegetable garden since he was a youth. "Years ago, everyone had a vegetable garden. There are only a few left now," said Steixner.

Many old climbing and rambling roses still seen growing along fences are varieties of a century ago.

Depression and War

When economic hardship fell on Bethlehem during the Depression in the 1930s, Mayor Robert Peifle supervised the acquisition of empty lots throughout the city; cooperation of home gardeners was requested to contribute seeds which resulted in 175 gardens created for those to cultivate without monetary charge.

Known as "Depression Gardens," hundreds of tons of vegetables were grown, which enabled many struggling families fresh vegetables for the table.

Peifle also launched a program to grow and preserve fruits and vegetables which created 10,000 processed and canned jars to be distributed to needy families during winter months.

As the U.S. entered WWII in the 1940s, working class Southsiders felt the effect of gasoline and sugar rationing. "Victory Gardens" sprouted everywhere, similar to

during wartime years.

Beyond those years, the need for growing fresh fruits and vegetables had run its course, though many elderly immigrants still retained the tradition of planting and harvesting their own fruits of labor.

A Loss of Favor

Post-WWII produce became easily available at Southside corner grocery stores. Toward the end of the last century, immigrant elders who had passed on took vivid recollections of their agrarian homeland with them.

Some grandchildren, now seniors themselves, weren't necessarily committed to toiling in the soil. They often lacked experience of their grandparents who simply loved working the earth.

This attitude was compounded by the relocation of forthcoming generations eager to leave the old neighborhoods and build their own homes elsewhere.

Other factors changing attitudes on gardening were the introduction of the

Portuguese-born Carlos Almeida maintains a Slate St. vegetable garden with a small orchard of fruit trees and a grape arbor.



gardens these folks cultivated during the depression years.

Many unemployed family members were provided with "Thrift Gardens," initiated by the state's Emergency Relief Board to furnish seeds.

Hundreds of vegetable gardens were planted around Bethlehem under the supervision of the city inspector.

Gardens tended by immigrants and their American-born children became an outward sign of patriotism and solidarity

refrigerator, the freezer; televisions and computers; education and affluence.

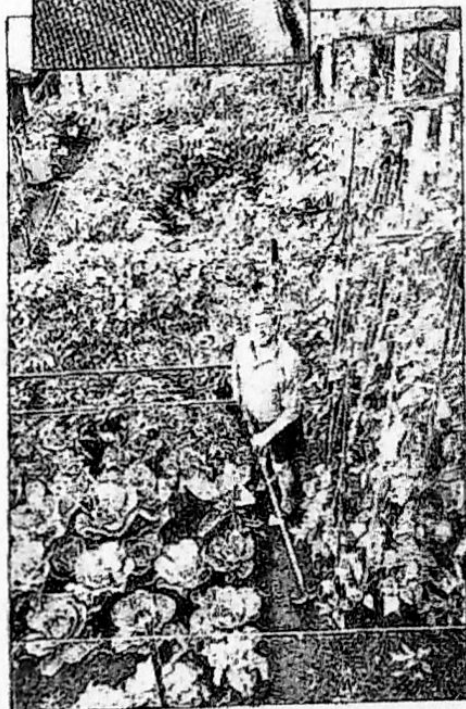
The New Millennium

Many Southsiders who have acquired their homes—perhaps the very same homes their parents and grandparents owned—now charge high rents to college students in need of housing.

This factor has contributed to the demise, albeit, the eradication of many backyard gardens.



"My wife cleans the house—I clean the garden." Portuguese immigrant, Jose Martins, E. Sixth St.



Homeowners who rent their houses find over-parked streets inadequate for their tenants; tenants insist that the owners provide parking spaces near the homes they rent.

Owners have no alternative but to yield to the needs of the tenant—so they pave their side or backyards for a price.

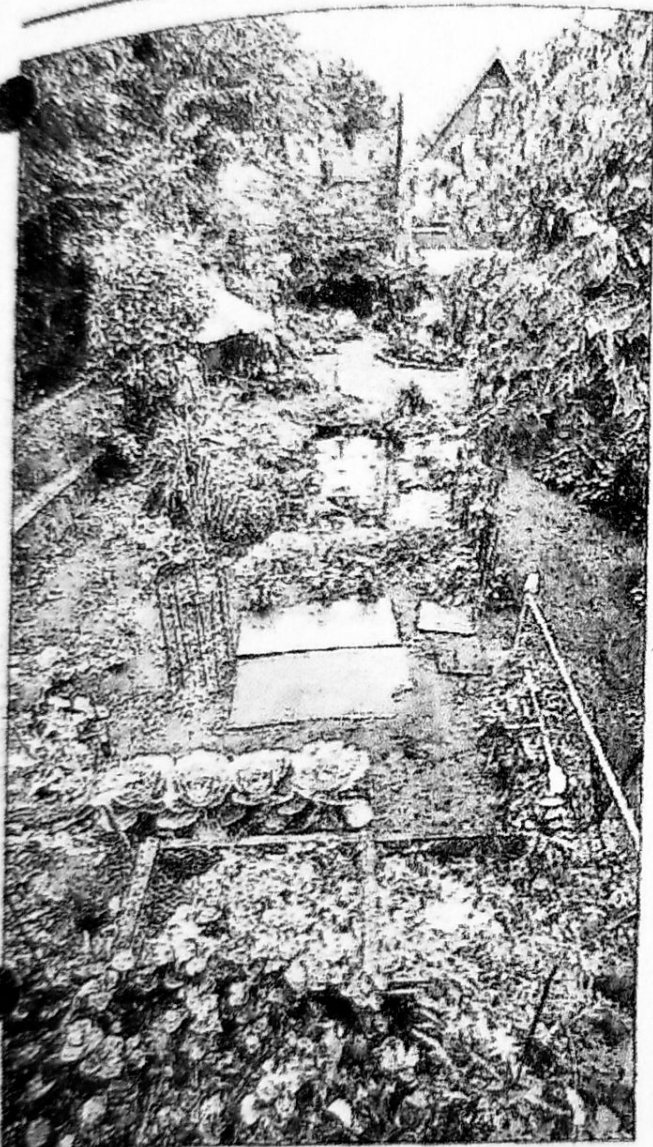
That price changes the scale, aesthetics and balance of the property as various-sized vehicles park against the homes, amending the neighborhood's original character and tone.

Ethnic Gardens Revisited

Discovered in this garden odyssey were surprising remnants of old traditional ethnic gardens and many reinventions.

Inspired by the philosophical "variations on a theme," many homeowners have embellished their properties with the quintessential vegetable garden—or have even created miniature gardens of Eden as places to escape the ills and turmoil of global time and space.

Southsiders attain garden knowledge



either through an innate heritage or by garden publications and tv programs. Nurseries and supermarkets offer ready-to-plant flats or six-packs for any green-thumbed aficionado who hasn't the time to grow them from seed.

Whether a diminutive "pocket garden" or "Victory Garden" on a double lot—many savvy Southside homeowners have opted not to "pave paradise and put up a parking lot."

Instead they have discovered that gardens not only enrich their lives but also those of their neighbors—

an idea practiced a century ago by immigrants who planted gardens, then watched their community grow.

—Ken Ranciere



(Above, left) The house of Mario and Sandy Solis balances with their backyard paradise, which features annual and perennial flowers, garden pavilion, pond (top right), and a vegetable garden—all within the scale of a narrow lot on Atlantic St. (Bottom center and right) Jeff and Jo (Scobo) Fluck created a well-planned sunken flower garden in the small backyard of their Lanier St. property.