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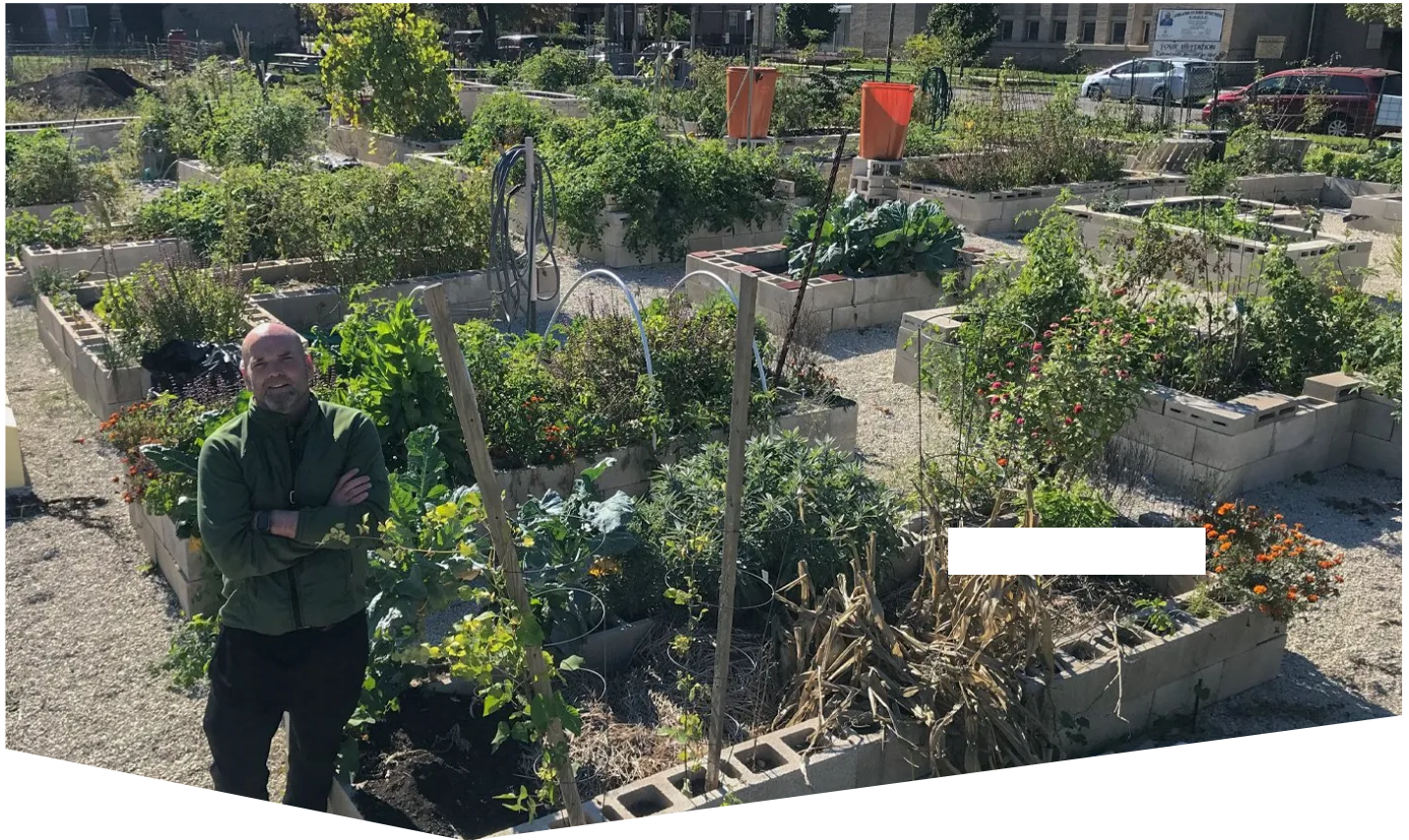
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# Growing Community in Vacant Chicago Lots



Most community gardens don't last more than 10 years. But the Harambee Garden—at 12 years and running—has lessons to share.

Why you can trust us

BY JORDYN HARRISON

8 MIN READ

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**F**rom 100 feet in the air, the parcel at 500 N. Waller Ave. in the Austin neighborhood of Chicago looks like the center of a donut.

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of five city lots. The land once stood empty and desolate, like many  
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 vacant lots in Chicago, but today, it houses beds of vegetables and

fruits soaking in the sun and goats from a nearby farm resting under the shade of a tree. In the middle of the green space sits a gazebo with a hand-painted sign that reads, “Harambee! Gardens.”

“From the start, it was something big enough that people would know about [it], partially because of the sheer size of it,” says Seamus Ford, co-founder of the garden, as he gives a tour on a cool October day, picking raspberries and pointing out tomatoes along the way.

Ford, a Chicago-born outdoorsman, casually walks through the garden with humble familiarity. Every now and then, he pauses, looking over the expanse of green in wonder, and recounts a detail about the garden’s beginnings.

In 2008, Ford, a special project manager for an educational company and a resident of the Austin neighborhood, became concerned about fossil fuel inputs and how food is grown.

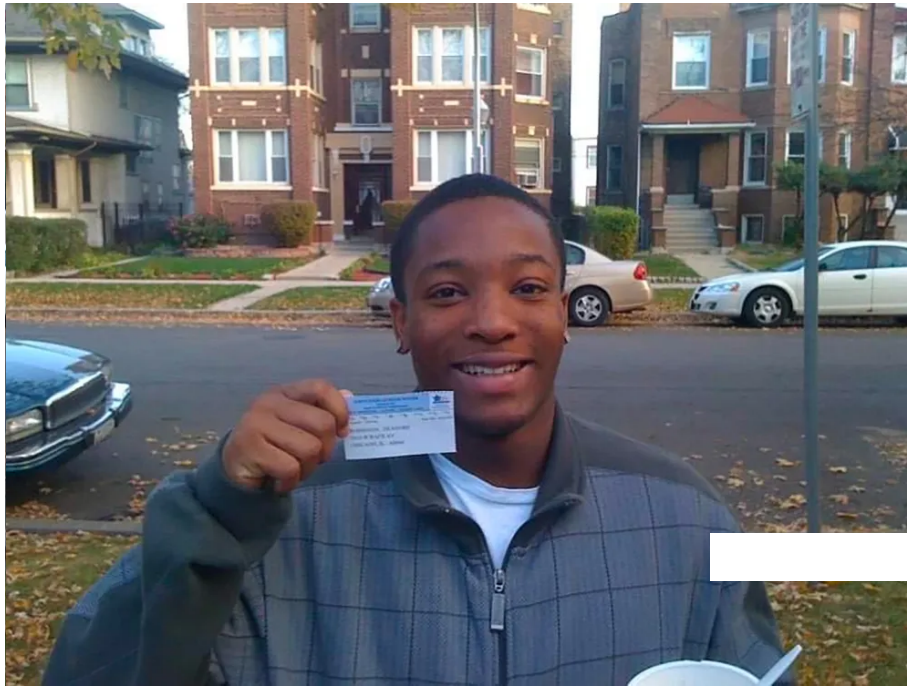
“When fuel prices were going through the roof, it started to get really clear to me that there’s a change underway, and it could be a bad one if we don’t have answers to this,” Ford recalls. And that’s when he got into gardening. “I basically got rid of any grass, almost all the grass where I live, and built raised beds.”

Around the same time, he often drove by a vacant lot and began to feel a “siren call” to build a community garden. According to the DePaul Institute for Housing Studies, there are nearly 32,000 vacant lots in Chicago. Though many contain debris and trash, they can be an ecological and social opportunity. Planting a garden amid an otherwise empty lot is an opportunity that an increasing number of communities are choosing to pursue, but it is also one that requires hard work to sustain.



Riot, an organization with the goal of creating a network of urban gardens “growing local food, fostering resilience, and reweaving the fabric of our community, one planting bed at a time.”

Now, 12 years in, the Harambee Community Garden can provide lessons about how it was able to last this long and where it’s headed from here.



Deandre Robinson the day he voted in his first election in 2010.  
*Photo courtesy of Root Riot*

## Sowing Seeds of Change

In late spring of 2010, Ford was mowing the lot’s overgrown grass when Deandre Robinson, then a junior at Frederick Douglass Academy High School, walked across the street to ask Ford what he was doing. Robinson was thrilled with Ford’s answer, because students and teachers at Frederick Douglass had been discussing what could be done with that very lot, which had stood empty for more than 25 years.

“His face lit up so bright,” Ford says, recalling meeting Robinson 11

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“all pull together.”  
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Austin residents and members of surrounding communities organized workdays to begin transforming the vacant lot. Eager student volunteers from Frederick Douglass, like Robinson, helped with mowing, preparing the soil, and building the initial 30 garden beds—which grew to 58 the second year.

Interested gardeners, experienced or not, could rent a 4-by-8-foot raised garden bed for \$40 a year or \$100 for three years (which remains the price to this day). The cost covers materials needed for the garden, such as soil, compost, tools, and the beds themselves. People take home the food that is grown or give it away to the firehouse, the senior home, or other neighbors.

The garden has brought people from all walks of life together across the road dividing the Austin neighborhood from its more affluent neighbor, Oak Park. “Everybody was able to link up together and find common ground and make a new friend, find mer Robinson says. A jobs program called Youth Guidance even got youth who were involved with local gangs to participate in the garden.

In the heat of Chicago summers, adults worked alongside youth to pull weeds and tend to crops. During the school year, they worked to make sure youth stayed on top of their studies and found other opportunities to add to their résumés. Adult gardeners helped Robinson study for the SAT and get an internship with local elected official U.S. Rep. Danny K. Davis. Ford even took Robinson shopping to get his first suit and tie.

Though Robinson doesn’t currently garden—he’s now a petty officer 1st class in the Navy and an entrepreneur—he credits his work ethic and consciousness of how food is grown to his time spent at

Harambee

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I'm never embarrassed. I'm very prideful, because a lot of the time, they don't know us. ... They don't know our situation, our

struggles," Robinson says.

He believes the way in which the garden exposed him to new experiences as a teen can also influence the current generation of youth for the better.

"Why not give them the opportunity to appreciate something by growing it, raising it, by having a sense of ownership?" he says. "You treat things different when you have a sense of ownership."



The original team of community members and students from Douglas Academy High School who started Harambee in 2010. *Photo courtesy of Root Riot*

## Lessons From Another Generation

In addition to attracting students from the high school, Harambee pulled together people from other surrounding buildings. The churches started doing Sunday school classes in the garden, the firehouse supplied water, and the local library got a bed and started doing after-school programming.

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apartment windows, gradually made their way outside to get involved. Ford says a number of the neighborhood's older residents

grew up in the rural South with a basic knowledge of how to grow food. Many of them came north during the Great Migration, when, between 1916 and 1970, millions of African Americans left the rural South and landed in Midwestern cities like Chicago in search of economic opportunities and to escape from racial violence and Jim Crow segregation.

Once they landed in the city, many of these new Chicagoans sought ways to remain connected to parts of their agricultural history and reap the benefits of spending time outdoors amid an industrialized urban environment, according to Brian McCammack, author of *Landscapes of Hope: Nature and the Great Migration in Chicago*.

“Migrants’ ‘kinship with the soil’ was never completely severed in Chicago,” McCammack writes. Instead, relationships with nature were actively reshaped, recast, and reimaged in the city’s landscapes of hope.”

Accessing green spaces wasn’t always easy though.

“Low-paying jobs and racially discriminatory housing policies had the effect of clustering Black Chicago’s working classes in the most impoverished and segregated neighborhoods, so building connections with nature in their own private green spaces was virtually out of the question.

At the same time, the parks and beaches most easily accessible to them were small, ill-equipped, and even hazardous—landscapes that could inspire more disillusionment than hope,” McCammack writes.

So when the Harambee garden opened in Austin, a neighborhood that has endured decades of disinvestment, residents old and young latched on to the opportunity to sow seeds of change.

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about how to do so many different things: growing a tomato plant to growing okra, how to manage your soil,” Ford says. “Some people couldn’t walk, and they’d just sit in motorized scooters on the sidewalk giving instructions to the kids.”



Installing the first 16 raised beds in May 2010. *Photo courtesy of Root Riot*

## Growing Through the Gravel

To be sure, sustaining the garden has been an ongoing challenge. The original wooden beds fell apart and were replaced with cinder block beds that are nestled on a plot of gravel. The gravel, too, was a response to the problem of invasive bindweed, which required constant mowing and removal. The weed almost choked the life out of the garden at one point, but a core group of gardeners devoted themselves to keeping the garden alive. In 2019, [NeighborSpace](#), an urban land trust, purchased and protected the land and installed gravel to help prevent the bindweed from taking over.

Community gardens like Harambee are becoming increasingly popular, with more than 29,000 garden plots in city parks in the 100



community gardens last for more than 10 years. The most commonly cited reason for gardens dissolving was “lack of interest by gardeners.”

While the Harambee garden is embraced by the community, the number of Austin residents who rent garden beds fluctuates year to year. Still, the commitment of the garden’s most active members have held it together during its most difficult times. One of them, Maria Sorrell, was walking through the neighborhood in 2010 when she saw banners advertising the garden.

“Originally, I was just going to make a donation, because I wasn’t into gardening,” Sorrell says. But as a retiree with lots of free time, she decided to rent a bed in the garden’s very first year and has been making connections and learning to grow vegetables ever since.

Over the years, volunteers have traveled from various parts of the city and western suburbs to help in the garden, including high school students and others seeking volunteer hours as part of community service.

“The people that tend to come to volunteer days often are people from outside the community,” Ford says, “and the active people participating are not always necessarily reflective of the community.” Ford sees this as a challenge and an opportunity.

Participating gardeners, about 30 currently, are considering building a steering committee for the garden to decide how they might get more Austin residents to rent beds and increase the number of gardeners involved in events and planning.

“The space belongs to everybody,” says Ford, who still resides in Austin and actively participates in the garden. “This isn’t a club. This is just a facility for the community.”



A gazebo sits in the middle of the garden. *Photo by Jordyn Harrison*

## Expanding the Garden's Reach

Over time, the garden has become increasingly self-supporting. While Harambee once relied on the generosity of the senior home and firehouse for its water, NeighborSpace has since installed an underground water system and aboveground watering stations.

The gardeners still collaborate with organizations in the community to educate people on growing their own food and serve as a location for gathering and connecting. For instance, this past summer, a group of youth in the Park District's TRACE (Teens Reimagining Arts, Culture, and Environment) program worked with alt Space Chicago, an Austin art organization, to build seating for the garden with repurposed wood. Future plans include adding a play area for children, installed with the help of the West Side Nature Play Network, a group of community partners dedicated to creating accessible and safe opportunities for children and caregivers to explore the outdoors on Chicago's West Side.

that opened around the same time as Harambee. Seeing goats  
lounging in the middle of a city neighborhood often evokes curiosity

from people walking by.

“They’re just so interesting to people that people stop along the fence, and they’ll pull up some grass and feed it to the goats,” Ford says.

“And a weird thing happens when you’re standing next to a stranger observing something that’s kind of wondrous.

“If you’re there long enough, you feel obliged to introduce yourself. And the introduction is like a threshold ... it’s a subtle form of connection,” Ford says. “The garden is a place where individual human connections get made.”

 **JORDYN HARRISON** is a writer and video producer from Chicago, IL. She is a graduate of the Greenlee School of Journalism and Communication at Iowa State University and is currently pursuing her master’s degree in Civic Media at Columbia College Chicago. As a graduate student, she is exploring how to merge her passion for visual storytelling with community engagement, and her writing focus has been on the Austin community. She can be reached through her email: [jordyncreates@gmail.com](mailto:jordyncreates@gmail.com) or her website: [be.net/jordyncreates](http://be.net/jordyncreates)

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