“Real security evolves only when you are in a viable relationship with your neighbors,” says Karl Linn, whose work has inspired community gardens that serve as neighborhood commons around the world.
COMMON Interests

Community gardens aren't just quaint—they're a growing survival strategy, says Karl Linn, a pioneer of urban gardening. By Renée Lertzman

Karl Linn was born in 1923 on a fruit tree farm in a small village in northern Germany. His mother established the thriving farm as an accredited training center for gardening and offered "horticultural therapy" to emotionally troubled people. When Linn was ten, the family fled the Nazis and emigrated to Palestine. Linn farmed to support his family, completed horticultural school, and co-founded one of the first kibbutzim in what is now Israel. But he decided to leave in 1946 because he felt the way the new Israelis treated the Palestinians was unfair, and it reminded him of his own persecution in Germany.

Linn trained in psychoanalysis in Zurich and later emigrated to the United States. When he arrived in New York in 1948 at the age of twenty-five, he co-founded the Reede School for disturbed children, and started a private practice in child psychoanalysis. In the 1950s, Linn launched a landscape architecture practice, but eventually realized he didn't want to offer his services only to those who could afford it.

Linn decided to devote his career to the creation of "commons" and community spaces that drew upon his skills as both a landscape architect and psychologist. In 1959 he joined the landscape architecture faculty at the University of Pennsylvania. There he helped design some of the first neighborhood commons in distressed urban regions, including Washington, D.C., and inner-city Philadelphia.

Since then, Linn has pioneered community gardens and urban commons. He moved to Berkeley, California, where he became deeply involved in peace work and the community garden movement. Among his many contributions are the Perilla Community Garden and the Karl Linn Community Garden, dedicated in his honor on what is now Karl Linn Day in Berkeley.

One of the signatures of Linn's work is the inclusion of meeting places in community gardens. His projects have been featured in an award-winning documentary, A Lot in Common (available from www.bullfrogsfilms.com). At eighty-one, Linn is "passing on" his many projects to ensure their survival. This attention to the continuation of his work reflects his approach to community projects as organic processes, which require as much care, attention, and planning as any thriving garden.

Linn is known around the world and has received many awards for his peace efforts, his innovations in...
garden design, and his spirit, which emanates from a deep connection with nature as a source of inspiration, creativity, and healing. After escaping Nazi persecution, Lian has dedicated his life to nurturing friendship and community among people as an antidote to violence and totalitarianism. He embodies hope.

RENEE LERTZMAN: A phrase I’ve heard you use many times is the “reawakening of the commons.” What do you mean by commons—and why a “reawakening”?

"We need to focus on minimizing destruction and working on life-affirming possibilities."

KARL LINN: A commons can be any place in which people assemble, indoors or outdoors. Commons refers not only to the physical environment—land, air, and water—but also to people's consciousness. That is, how we interact and relate with one another in community.

Reawakening means a deconditioning of the ways we are accustomed to interacting with one another and a revival of our capacities for collaboration. Learning how to participate in commons is a very slow process, particularly for those raised in this culture. It takes a lot of care and nurturing. People yearn for community, but facilitating its growth is not easy.

RL: Is a reawakening of the commons particularly important for cities and urban neighborhoods?

KL: Many Americans are not really accustomed to living in community. People are isolated, living in houses separated by hedges and fences, or cooped up in apartments. For people not to know their next-door neighbor can create alienation and fear. But once people meet in the neighborhood and become familiar with one another through a community garden—sharing a vision of what a common place might be, engaging in building a commons—they can develop relationships. The experience of living in a neighborhood becomes much more meaningful and much more secure.

What we experience today are enclosures of the commons; before industrialization and before the concept of private property, nature was the commons. Over time, people were prevented from having access to the land they once shared in common. One example of enclosure is the street in the city. The street first became a place where people could meet casually, sitting on door stoops. But with the increase of cars, the streets became too dangerous for socializing, and the buildings got turned around, with the emphasis on the backyards.

RL: Do you see this changing?

KL: Yes. The American Community Garden Association is helping to create community gardens all over the country. Community gardens also are a spreading survival strategy. As the gaps are growing between rich and poor, the less affluent members of the community are eager to grow food close to home. Part of the rise in community garden projects is also because community gardens are increasingly becoming neighborhood commons. Community gardens don’t only have planting beds; they have shaded areas, benches, and tables. Statistics indicate that, first, community gardeners want to grow fresh produce close to home. But second, they want to socialize, not only with other gardeners, but with members of their families and friends.

RL: Doesn’t introducing community gardens into lower-income neighborhoods carry the risk of increasing gentrification?

KL: That’s exactly what it can do. A successful community garden or commons can increase real estate prices and initiate gentrification. That’s why it is important for us to counter gentrification with strategies such as ensuring affordable housing and the ability to grow one’s food. To grow food makes a big difference. People don’t have to pay money to go to the store to buy all their food—it helps to increase local sustainability. It can help put the brakes on gentrification, because we really aspire to is maintaining viable, multicultural, and economically diverse neighborhoods.

RL: The idea of people coming together and making something beautiful contrasts so sharply with the strip malls I see all across the country.

KL: Malls and strip malls are more obvious. Community gardens and neighborhood commons are there, but you have to look for them: they are not so obvious and are often hidden. They are created through personal relationships and trust. Last week I tried to find a community garden at the married student housing at a local university. It was so tucked away, that at first I couldn’t find it. The garden involves about seventy-five families, and it’s a huge area.

Recently a gathering took place in Nottingham, England, about community gardens, and people came from Russia, Africa, and all over the world. Community gardens are a global movement. It’s not only “quaint”—it’s also existentially real. People need to eat. Food security and food accessibility are a fundamental part of our survival. Therefore, especially in an age when you have a growing pauperization taking place, creating food becomes very important.

RL: How does participating in community...
garden fulfill other existential needs, in addition to growing food?

KL: Plants respond immediately to your care. This leads to a basic psychological aspect of not feeling so alienated and powerless in the world. So much that affects our lives is out of our control. There is so little that responds to our care. Plants can disarm us emotionally, as smiling infants can. It’s a way of relating to nature in a more intimate way and feeling more rooted in our place.

A good network of commons in community gardens provides opportunities for people to be alone in peaceful settings, too. You can choose how involved with others you wish to be.

RL: How can community gardens also be sites for political or peace efforts?

KL: A commons can accommodate a kaffee-klatsch. But it can also potentially be a forum for the exchange of ideas. The commons offer real possibility for mobilizing people into action. As I like to say, community commons should be equipped not only with sandboxes, but also with soapboxes.

One example of how a garden can be used for peace is the planting of a peace pole at the Peralta Community Art Garden in Berkeley. It is a pole in which “Peace with Justice” is carved in Hebrew, English, German, and Arabic. The planting of the peace pole was an occasion of bringing Palestinians and Jews together, and so the commons contributed to peace-making. Commons can have a peace pole, a place to assemble, a plaque: things deliberately designed for peacemaking.

RL: When confronted with a community that can benefit by a commons, what is your approach?

KL: Instead of focusing on the problems, I focus on the resources available. This literally goes down to the level of the skills and talents of community members. Whatever comes out of the project, it should be within the reach of people to do it. For example, there was an architect with a social conscience working in Harlem, where he deliberately built a high-rise out of cement, rather than out of steel or a material that may have looked prettier or been more architecturally interesting. Why? Because the people in the community had the skills to work with cement. It was an engineering decision informed by social justice that impacted the whole technology of the building. It also impacted the economics of the neighborhood by providing employment.

RL: What inspires people to contribute their skills?

KL: In terms of community organizing, it is very important to cultivate leadership. Participants are encouraged to pursue their interests and can then give leadership to others because they are excited. People need to feel acknowledged and supported in what they have to offer and what they want to do.

At the Peralta Community Garden, Carole, an elementary teacher for decades, decided to learn about native California plants growing in the area and produced a little guidebook with her students. She also helped create a circular planting bed featuring an extensive collection of native plants. She then inspired Michael, who knew nothing about plants, to become passionate about growing native California plant seeds. He’s now growing seeds, even from plants threatened with extinction, which he now distributes.

RL: Are there problems that often arise as people “reawaken the commons”?

KL: Yes. One problem involves people putting in their share of work and coming to work parties. Some people are always more diligent than others. That’s a big issue.

Other common problems involve internal dynamics. For example, at the Peralta Community Garden, one woman had a fantasy of living in the suburbs, with roses and lawns. One day she walked by a gardening shop, and somebody was loading some sod on a truck to dump. She offered to take it off his hands, and asked him to bring the sod to the community garden. She placed it in the garden along the sidewalk and watered it every...
board of directors, he has a healthy remove from day-to-day operations and takes no financial gain from them.

WILL SUCCESS SPOIL Greyston? “I don’t have personal experience in many socially involved businesses that...have grown large and haven’t lost a lot of their initial reason for being,” says Glassman, noting the founders’ disappointments with new corporate owners at organizations like Ben and Jerry’s and Odwalla. Whether Greyston remains Greyston will depend on whether the growth means losing jobs, Glassman suggests.

This employee focus is at once Greyston’s reason for being and its dilemma, says Allen Grossman, a Harvard professor of management practice who studies socially responsible entrepreneurship. If the primary objective is to create revenue, and the company grows successfully into a higher-cost structure, he asks, how detrimental is the social mission to that goal? “The tension is not irreconcilable, but it’s very difficult to keep in balance,” he observes. The company’s policy of hiring without asking questions could, ultimately, be a costly inefficiency and a barrier to growth.

But Walls avers that his biggest achievement has been instituting and sticking to open-hiring, a policy envisioned in Glassman’s original plan, but not always the mandate it is under Walls. Hiring troubled people without interviewing, testing, or checking their backgrounds raises training costs and makes for high turnover, Walls admits. Only two out of ten hires pass the twelve-week intensive apprenticeship on the bakery floor. “But I can tell you, had we had to choose [among job candidates], we usually wouldn’t have chosen the two who make it,” says Walls.

Greyston’s humane process of hiring is what Walls says he’d like to systematize “to show it can work elsewhere, to show that you can come into a low-income, predominately minority community and hire employees there and be successful.”

To the doubtful, Walls points out that under this hiring system “we’ve gone from $3 million to $5 million in sales, from break-even to profiting, and from a broken-down factory to a $10 million state-of-the-art facility.”

As for the success of Greyston’s social mission, Dorothy Haynes, a formerly unemployed single mother who has, over six years, worked her way from the “hashed ingredient specialist” to customer service coordinator, offers this perspective: “Greyston enables us to be a part of their [the wealthy people’s] world. They eat these high-quality products, and when they see where it comes from and who’s baking it, we become a part of society, too—we’re out there with the best of them. It’s time to acknowledge us.”

It will be hard to bite into a scoop of chocolate fudge brownie ice cream again without thinking of the people of Greyston.

Want to Learn More?
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day. Soon I noticed a lot of group discussion going on about the lawn. At the next gardening meeting, she was challenged. The gardeners said to her, “You’re embarrassing us! It’s supposed to be an ecological model of a garden, and you have this water guzzling suburban lawn!” But she was complimented for being resourceful.

RL: Where is the space to create these commons?

KL: Right now it’s usually vacant or oddly shaped lots in residential blocks. But space for community gardens should be allotted in the city’s general plan. Only if it’s part of a general plan can the space be secure. That’s why we spent many years here in Berkeley working with city planners to incorporate guidelines for community gardens into the general plan of the city.

RL: Why are commons so important to you personally?

KL: I think it has to do with the fact that, in essence, I am a displaced person. I was uprooted from the land on which I was raised, and subsequently the importance of having control over land and being part of land is part of my own experience, in a very deep sense.

RL: Do you have hope for the future?

KL: The word hope inspires too affirmative a prediction of the future, which I can’t share and identify with. The challenge is dealing with paradoxes—for example, how do you keep community gardens from contributing to gentrification in our market economy? There is always complexity to our actions, and there’s always uncertainty and unknowing about the future.

I feel much pain, what Joanna Macy calls “global anguish,” about what is happening in the world, especially in the Middle East. On one hand, I’m grateful that I was able to escape Nazi persecution; going to Palestine saved my life. On the other hand, it’s hard to reconcile [that]

saving my life has caused hardship and displacement to Palestinians.

We easily develop scenarios in our own heads that life on the planet is a lost cause. If you are reasonably aware and reading the news, you can’t help being worried and scared. It’s so important to let oneself feel pain for the world, because it can mobilize one into action. We need to focus on minimizing destruction and working on life-affirming possibilities. I consider myself neither a pessimist nor an optimist, but a “possibilist.” The only thing I or anyone else can do is to create possibilities that support aliveness.

Want to Learn More?
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