

Part 2

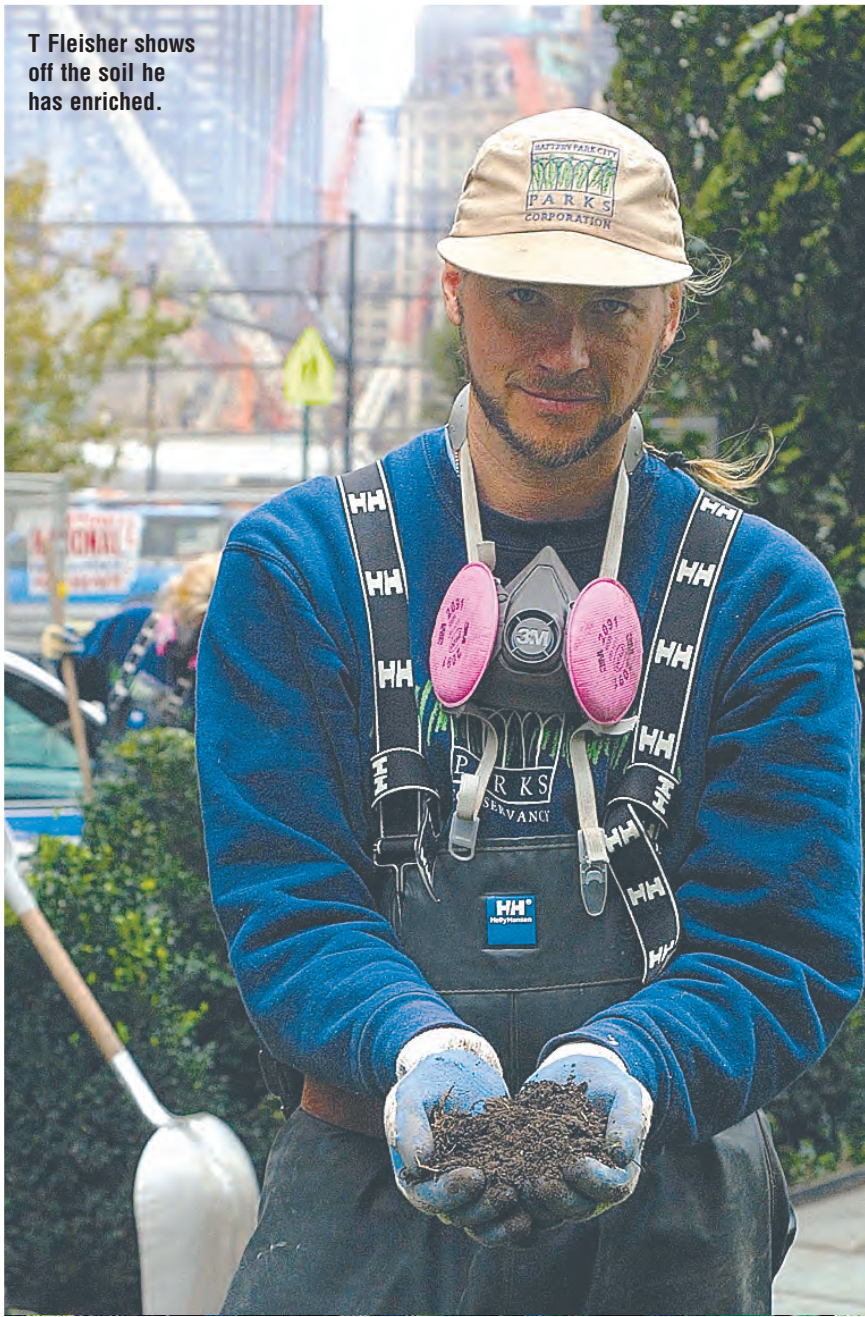


LIFESTYLES
HOME
& GARDENS

Comfort And Style **B14**

Coming Together for Lennon and New York, B3

T Fleisher shows off the soil he has enriched.



Gardens of Solace

Photos by Robert Spencer

Restoring the flowers and plants of Battery Park City **B6-7**



Finding Strength in

As gardeners of Battery Park City restore the flowers and the shrubs and the

IN THE GARDENS of Battery Park City, it's easy to forget the scarred and wounded landscape of lower Manhattan. Especially in the children's garden at the north end of the city within a city, where autumn sunshine dances on ruby-red Swiss chard and yellow squash blossoms and the lush green fronds of a banana tree. Where golden sunflowers stretch toward an innocent blue sky, and scarlet runner beans and purple and white passion flowers scramble along the black iron fence.

Looking west to the rolling green lawns and the Hudson River and New Jersey on the opposite bank, it is all so very scenic. It is just a few weeks after the now indelible date of Sept. 11, 2001, and everything seems as it has always been until I stroll a few yards up the path to a corner of the park where a little girl is chasing pigeons she

can never catch. She giggles as she runs among the miniature people and odd creatures of a bronze sculpture called "The Real World." It's a strange land populated by sneering frogs and preying cats and tiny workers pushing giant pennies toward a many-armed idol.

Then I turn to the southeast, where the real real world looms. Through a dusty haze I see the gray ghost of the ruptured skyline. It is little more than a third of a mile away.



Irene Virag

The little girl's laughter pulls me back into the gardens. The flowers and vegetables, the greenery of trees and shrubs are touchstones for tomorrow. The child's mother agrees. Susanna Kopchains and her husband and two children are among those residents who have been able to return to their homes in the vast complex known as Battery Park City.

"We've only lived here since February, but it's always felt like an oasis," she says. "We moved from Princeton, and having such lovely gardens made the transition easier. Until that Tuesday. We watched it all happen.

'In the face of something so horrible, it's nice to be reminded that there's only good in the earth. The earth will recover. Seeing the beauty of the garden is a healing thing.'

We were here on the lawn. We came back home a few days ago."

Her eyes mist and she waves to 2-year-old Emily, who has given up on pigeons and is running on tiptoes after a fluttering sparrow. "My son is in kindergarten. He goes to P.S. 89 here, but he's been displaced to another school in the Village. We're surrounded by so much death now, so much devastation — the gardens seem even more beautiful and alive. The gardens have even more meaning now. It looks like they cleaned each and every leaf and flower and petal."

In effect, that's what they're doing. That's what they had to do.

"They" is the Battery Park City Parks Conservancy, a private nonprofit organization that maintains the green spaces of the 90-acre community — from island beds and perennial borders to foundation plantings and pocket gardens, each with its own style and spirit. From the grassy lawns of the north meadow to the winding, boulder-lined paths of South Cove and the series of parks that run through the complex and offer changing moods for passersby. In all, nearly 30 acres of greenery soften the concrete landscape.

"They" are people like T Fleisher, the director of horticulture, who was already at



the Soil



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grass, they also find they are restoring their souls

work reviewing proper pruning techniques with a building supervisor when he heard the first plane hit. He saw the second plane. T lives in Battery Park City. His wife and 8-year-old daughter were evacuated, and he got into their apartment to remove a few belongings. "The rest of the day was unlike any other day," he says. When he knew his family was safe, his thoughts turned to his work. To his plants — to thousands of trees and shrubs and perennials turned ashen white by the dust and debris and powder and plaster that rained down from the stricken skyscrapers.

By Thursday morning, the 15-member horticulture staff was in the field along with maintenance crews and workers from other departments. All together, about 70 people have been putting in seven-day weeks to restore the land. "They" are gardeners like Manuel Rivera, a man in a brown hard hat with an American flag decal who has been tilling the beds and borders of Battery Park City for 14 years. He lives in Freeport, and every day he rides the Long Island Rail Road to Far Rockaway, where he takes the A train. Years ago he planted the allée of silver lindens that graces the esplanade along the river with his own hands, and he

Old Glory hangs over the green glory of the Children's Garden, above left. Above right: The cleanup continues a few blocks from Ground Zero. Right: a corner of park flowers, Lady Liberty in the distance.

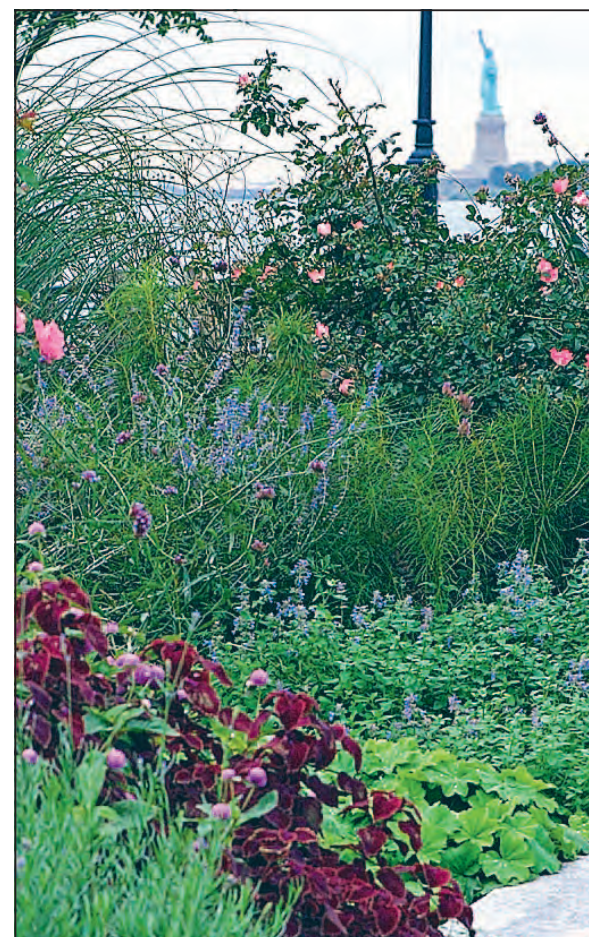
planted the oakleaf hydrangeas and azaleas and roses, too. Manuel and two co-workers are hosing down the sidewalks of the esplanade. "I take care of these trees and plants like they're my babies," he says. The area was among the first to be cleaned — T started with the most-traveled spots.

"This place is like my backyard," Manuel says, "and I'm proud of it. I was mowing the lawn when it happened. I saw the towers come down. When I came back to work and saw the mess, I thought, 'This is it. All the years of caring, and it's over in one day.'"

But it wasn't.

In the darkness, we find symbols. Silver lindens and sweet gums and river birches and golden-rain trees become more than plants. They restore a small part of our souls in the shadow of death. The gardens at Battery Park City are a miracle of the earth's own strength and the people who nurture them.

Parts of Battery Park City sprung up on landfill excavated in the construction of the World Trade Center. The earth was sandy, and throughout his 12 years as horticultural director T has labored



See GARDENS on B18

Photos by Robert Spencer



A blanket of dust covers Wagner Park garden after Sept. 11. Below: The same spot cleaned up.

Finding Strength In The Soil

GARDENS from B6

to enrich it. "Our focus has always been on the soil. It's a totally organic, holistic landscape. No toxic pest controls, no inorganic fertilizers. We use our own low-nitrogen recipes of kelp, bonemeal and feathermeal. We make our own leaf compost, we use vermicompost, and we brew our own liquid biological amendments. When you look at a plant, what you're seeing is literally only the tip of the iceberg. Forty to 60 percent of any perennial is under the soil; up to 80 percent of a tree is underground. Soil is the key here. We found some suffocated earthworms under the debris. But as we've cleaned up, fat, healthy, lively ones are coming up for air."

T's crew is working in Rector Park near its great gate with piercing spires and a skeletal cupola. The steel, bronze and granite structure is supposed to be futuristic and also reminiscent of early skyscrapers. I just glance at the 50-foot-high gate; I'm still thinking about earthworms tunneling to the surface to let us know the soil is healthy. T will keep testing soil samples to make sure nutrient levels provide what the plants need.

In the quiet park bordered by yew hedges, about a dozen workers clean the grass with metal rakes. Everyone wears rubber overalls and waterproof boots and respirator masks. They pull on rubber gloves to pick up pieces of stuff that resemble dried wallboard. "These lawns were covered with dust and debris," T says.

In photos taken soon after the attack, white mist swirls across the landscape. The dust settled on buildings and cars and streets, and swept across the public gardens and parks and plazas of Battery Park City. The dust was like a wind-driven snowfall that creates drifts in one area and barely touches another. In many places the dust was a chalky blanket as much as a foot thick that coated foliage and caked around plants. The dust still



Photo by Robert Spencer

lives in the air.

"We've been taking things day by day," T says. "You try one thing, and if it doesn't work, you try something else. We tried to vacuum the stuff up, but that didn't do much. Here we're raking. We hosed down one area and tried using a shovel. We tried to clean the ivy but it was impossible, so we removed it. We may end up having to sod-cut the grass and replace it."

He scratches up a patch of grass with his pruners and reveals the rich brown earth beneath it. He lets the moist earth trickle through his fingers. "Working in the garden is my way of working through what I saw on Sept. 11th," T says.

The signs of that day are inescapable. Identification tags are compulsory, and every few blocks there is another checkpoint. In some places, Con Edison trucks dot the streets, and police and firefighters mingle. National Guard troops in camouflage uniforms pass by on foot and in Jeeps that fly American flags. Red Cross volunteers serve lunch in a boat moored in North Cove Harbor, and separate cleaning stations are designated for boots and helmets and masks.

Near the washing-up stations, a small garden is rooted in remembrance. Sedum Autumn Joy and Joe Pye weed and ornamental grasses, glorious in their season, define an area known as the Police Memorial. A black stone wall reminiscent of the Vietnam War Memorial lists the names of police officers who died in the line of duty in past years. In front of the wall, a new makeshift shrine blooms with wreaths of yellow asters and red, white and dyed-blue chrysanthemums. With pictures and honor rolls of fallen firefighters and police and Port Authority officers. With newspaper stories of heroes of Ground Zero and notes from kids to their missing dads. Firefighters and cops read the names and stare at the photos. They are big men who seem even larger in their helmets and boots. Some shake their heads. A firefighter weeps, a cop makes the sign of the cross and bows his head in prayer.

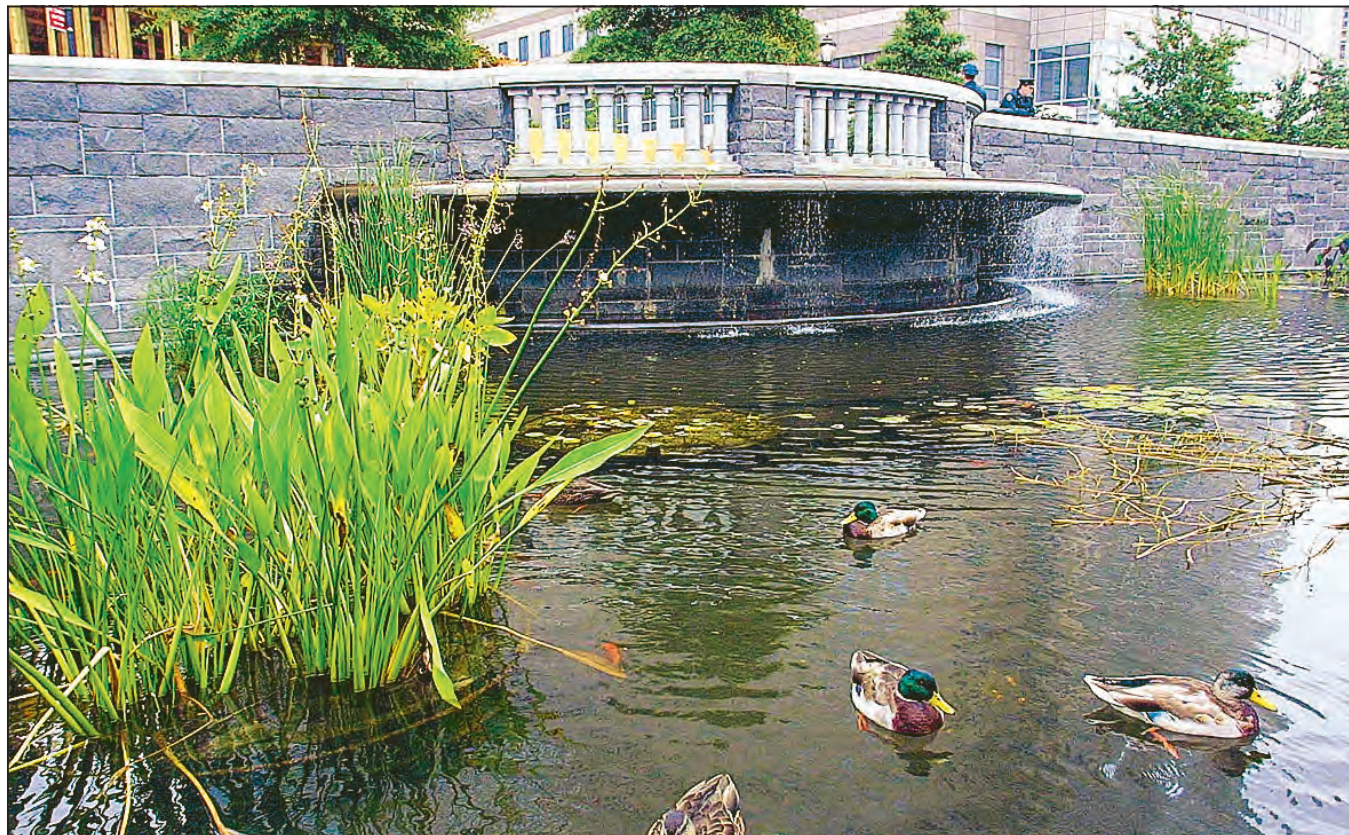


Photo by Robert Spencer



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Photo by Robert Spencer

Color is back in Wagner Park, and the lily pond offers serenity. Manuel Rivera, left below, and Evangelio Villalobos are among crews working seven days a week to restore the land.

T and his crew started in this spot. "There were eight inches of dust and paper," he says. "I knew people would be coming here."

There are only a few places where the dust still intrudes. In a couple of small raised beds in front of a closed sports club and cinema, hostas and coleus and sweet potato vines are shrouded in white. Scraps of paper caught in the foliage are remnants of life as it was. A single page from a desk calendar — the month is October. A canceled check. Pension forms. Faxes. Documents headed "Office of Surface Mining and Reclamation." Microfiche marked "General Ledger and Monthly Statement of Kidder Peabody."

If you turn and look to the east, the war zone is marked by the reaching arm of a great red crane. A charred building looks like a Roman ruin. But if you walk a block toward the river and around the corner, you come to a series of island beds where tender new growth sprouts on the evergreen hedges.

I walk for miles through the complex, my spirits lifted by what T and his crews have done.

"A couple of days ago you couldn't even walk on the esplanade," says Heidi Owen, who is strolling along the linden allée but has not yet returned to her home. "Now it's beautiful. Thank God, because the gardens are a huge part of why I live here."

From the children's garden by Rockefeller Park on the north to the "hot" and "cool" gardens of Wagner Park on the south, the greenery is a solace. It is difficult to tell which gardens were hard hit and which were barely touched. Several hollies had to be removed. And in an area called the Belvedere by the New York Mercantile Exchange, trowels and shovels were used to break up the foot-thick dust, and the rugosa roses and bayberries and yellow-twig dogwoods were cut back. But most gardens are as they always were — beautiful.

Sunshine gleams on the green heads of mallards in the lily pond, where fat koi swim and a monarch but-

terfly floats and flutters among the lotus and black elephant ears and umbrella palms and pickerel weed and water clover. Tony Falk, a commodity firm manager who lives in the financial district three blocks away from Battery Park City and returned to his apartment a few days before, comes to the pond for sanctuary. "It's nice to see birds and fish and plants and be reminded of life."

More than 400 species of trees, shrubs and perennials fill the beds and borders and islands cared for by the conservancy. In spring, countless bulbs color the byways, and dogwoods and rhododendrons and magnolias and peonies flourish. In summer, the gardens glow with roses and butterfly bushes and lilies and coreopsis and purple coneflowers and astilbes and much more. Now in early fall some of these flowers are still in bloom, and I see asters and dahlias and agastache and fountain grasses and Japanese anemones and salvias and sweet autumn clematis.

Rosa rugosa and trumpet vines bloom on the path along South Cove, where the first snow drops show up in February. The path skirts a grove of willows that weep outside the Museum of Jewish Heritage and lead to Wagner Park. Here the place called the "hot garden" is warm with the yellows and reds and oranges of hibiscus and dahlias and rudbeckia and tithonia and zinnias. The "cool garden" is restful with the pinks and blues of Russian sage and phlox and verbena and nicotiana.

"The beauty of the gardens is such a contrast to what's happening just a few blocks away," T told me earlier in the day. "In the face of something so horrible, it's nice to be reminded that there's only good in the earth. The earth will recover. Seeing the beauty of the garden is a healing thing."

As I walk through the cool garden, I can see the Statue of Liberty standing sentinel in the harbor. She raises her torch above a huge white Coast Guard vessel on guard just offshore.

I bend to touch the good earth. For all of us, the healing continues. ■



Photo by Robert Spencer