



New York's Nurseries Try a Transplant



Photographs by Tyler Hicks/The New York Times

Garden District Several new nurseries, including Liberty Sunset, are turning Red Hook, Brooklyn, into a gardening destination.

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Published: May 24, 2007

GARDENING in New York City can require the determination of a weed pushing through a sidewalk. There are hardships of space, light, microclimate and wind, not to mention the pain of hauling supplies across town and, frequently, up several flights of stairs. Add to that the shortage of serious garden centers — the kind with space for 50-pound bags of manure, for instance, or heirloom vegetable seedlings — and the challenges of tending a patch of green in a city known more for its grit than its earth can seem overwhelming.

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Tyler Hicks/The New York Times
Room to Grow Chelsea Garden Center, a Manhattan institution, recently opened a Brooklyn branch in Red Hook, above, with nearly 14,000 square feet of retail space.

But New Yorkers have found a way, piecing together a patchwork of suppliers that include Web sites, farmers' markets and particularly the few large-scale garden centers that have managed, like trumpet vines, to cling to their businesses in such an expensive real estate market.

Lately, though, as gentrification has made it increasingly difficult for those centers to hold onto the square footage they need, many gardeners have started to worry about losing their most valuable resources. The open lots dotted with carts of annuals and stacks of whiskey barrels are disappearing, often to be replaced by luxury housing.

So a new group of large nurseries that have suddenly sprung up in Red Hook, Brooklyn — since March, three have opened within blocks of each other — is a welcome surprise for many of the city's gardeners.

"There's really a need for this," said Marianne Tarulli, who was admiring the plants outside the new branch of the Chelsea Garden Center on Van Brunt Street one recent weekend morning. "People really want to garden." She added that although she can buy plants at many places on Staten Island, where she lives, few have the unusual perennials she wants.

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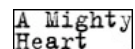
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At Gowanus Nursery on Summit Street, another of the new centers, Catherine Tait made a similar observation after shopping for her garden in Boerum Hill, Brooklyn. "This one raised the bar in terms of quality and diversity and interest," she said. "It's like, 'Oooh, look at that exotic purple leaf.' It's not like just pansies and peonies at Home Depot."

Although the area, about a mile southwest of Brooklyn Heights, is not served by the subway, its new nurseries are linked to the rest of the city by the B61 bus line, a kind of hipster local connecting Long Island City, Queens, with the Jay Street-Borough Hall station in downtown Brooklyn and Van Brunt Street, Red Hook's main drag.

At the north end of the neighborhood is Gowanus Nursery (45 Summit Street, 718-852-3116, gowanusnursery.com), which gained something of a cult following for the cool, unusual plants selected by its owner, Michele Paladino, in its four years in Carroll Gardens near the Gowanus Canal, and which opened in its new location — with 6,000 square feet, as against the previous 2,400 — on March 31.

Farther south, on a huge pier at the end of Van Dyke Street, is Liberty Sunset (204-207 Van Dyke Street, on Pier 41, 718-858-3400, libertysunset.com), the sprawling brainchild of Sandor Gubis, a Hungarian-born woodworker who has cultivated many of the plants himself, raising them organically; it has 10,000 square feet of indoor retail space and about twice as much outdoors.

A few blocks inland, on Van Brunt Street and in an annex lot around the corner, is the Chelsea Garden Center's first Brooklyn branch (444 Van Brunt, 212-727-7100, chelseagardencenter.com), which opened on April 23 with nearly 14,000 square feet of retail space. Chelsea is a Manhattan institution that has moved so often over the past 23 years that its owner, David Protell, says it should be called the Gypsy Garden Center.

The developments in Brooklyn are occurring at a time of flux for other outlets as well. Mr. Protell recently moved his main branch in Manhattan from 38th Street and 10th Avenue to 11th Avenue near 44th Street, downsizing by 25 percent, to 7,500 square feet. And Dimitri's, which began in 1959 as a florist on the Upper East Side, moved from East Harlem to a 12,000-square-foot shop in the Port Morris-Mott Haven section of the Bronx (2413 Third Avenue, 718-292-3338, dimitrisgardencenter.com).

In Manhattan, at least, "the buildable-square-foot prices are going through the roof, and developers are just looking at us like we're fresh meat because of what we do: we occupy land," said Dimitri Gatanas, who is making the new Bronx Dimitri's both a full-service garden center and a gathering spot with jazz and free barbecue on weekends. "We're a dying breed."

Mr. Protell, whose nursery has been chased by gentrification from Chelsea to the Bowery, back to Chelsea and then to the far West Side, said he almost gave up on the New York market but decided to stay and hold onto his longtime employees and customers. Those considerations, along with the promise of the many new gardens, courtyards, patios and balconies the Brooklyn housing boom is creating, spurred him to move into the borough.

In addition to plants — including trees, shrubs, annuals, perennials, grasses, vegetables and herbs — all three of the Red Hook centers offer a full range of garden design and installation services, as well as containers and planting materials. Chelsea offers perhaps the broadest selection: things like snapdragons, river birches and acclimated indoor trees, as well as custom-designed teak planter boxes and cast statuary.

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