



The Healing Gardens Of New York

Planting seeds, changing lives

**a documentary work-in-progress by award-winning
writer/director Alexandra Isles**

IFP MARKET SCREENING:

**Wednesday, September 21, 2005, 10:30 am
Theatre #4 Angelika Film Centre
Houston & Mercer Streets**

The Healing Gardens of New York is the story of lives and communities that have been transformed by gardens created in the response to crime, neglect, poverty and recidivism. The film features gardens ranging from a small asphalt triangle in Times Square to a spacious field on Rikers Island (the city's largest prison). In a city dominated by steel, glass, jackhammers and cranes, the importance of green spaces as a source of stability and emotional well-being is too often overlooked. The film makes it clear — New York's best gardens reach out.

***The Healing Gardens of New York' captures the one universal truth
all community gardens share —and that is the power to make
life better for those who toil in them.***

Zazel Loven
Senior Editor, *Organic Gardening*

Producer/Director Alexandra Isles produced and directed *The Power of Conscience: The Danish Resistance and Rescue of the Jews*; *Scandalize My Name: Stories from the Blacklist* (hosted by Morgan Freeman) and *Porraimos: Europe's Gypsies in the Holocaust*. Her work has been supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) the New York State Council for the Humanities and The New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA). Her films have been broadcast internationally and on PBS and featured at the Human Rights Watch, Margaret Mead, Hot Springs and Boston Jewish Film Festivals. They have received awards from the Black Maria, Chicago International and Golden Wheel Film Festivals.

Film Notes:

- Documentary work-in-progress
- Video/color
- English
- Intended length: 56 minutes



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Alexandra Isles has reached deep into the soul of gardens and gardeners to identify one of the mystical aspects of gardening – that mysterious interaction with soil and plants that produces a sense of well-being...

Anthony Smith
President, Horticultural Society of New York

Synopsis

In a city dominated by steel, glass, jackhammers and cranes, the importance of green spaces as a source of stability and emotional well-being is often overlooked.

The Healing Gardens of New York chronicles community gardens that have changed neighborhoods and transformed lives, making it clear — New York's best gardens reach out.

As it moves around New York City, each segment delves deeper into the effect of gardens on neighborhoods and individuals. With each section, the story goes deeper into the affect of gardens on communities and individuals.

- The Lower East Side, where the vibrant Save Our Gardens pageant celebrates the ongoing struggle to make community gardens permanent in the face of powerful real estate developers.
- In the South Bronx, an endangered community garden is a place where local pre-schoolers hunt for earthworms and take part in their own garden pageant.
- Taqwa Community Farm in the Bronx, where a man who was "lost and without direction" sees a seed he planted sprout and become a tomato, changing his life.
- The Cabbage Patch in Times Square, where a man who has suffered from mental illness finds increasing emotional stability through tending the garden.
- The Conservatory Garden where its restorer was warned that East Harlem neighbors would wreck her work. Instead, the garden has become a source of pride for the community.
- The GreenHouse Project on Rikers Island, where inmates whose lives haven't worked out find redemption in making things grow.
- The Labryinth of Contemplation in Battery Pakr, where city noises fade away, overcome by the chirps and rattles of crickets and cicadas.



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The Gardens

The Community Gardens, East Village, The Bronx

These gardens in the South Bronx were created from abandoned lots that had been magnets for drugs and prostitution. They've become a stabilizing force — venues for activism, artistic expression and imaginative enrichment[s] programs.

Taqwa Community Farm, Highbridge, The Bronx

In 1991, Abu Talib decided to turn a two-acre lot of dust and rubble into a place that would benefit his blighted community. Fourteen years later, his dream — Taqwa Community Farm — has a membership of over 100 families, youth mentoring internships, herbal medicine workshops and a "Grow and Give" program that feeds the neighborhood's needy.

The Cabbage Patch, Times Square

Surrounded by eight intersecting lanes of traffic and heated from below by a web of converging subway lines, this small garden is planted and maintained by a group of seniors from the Woodstock Single Room Occupancy (SRO) facility.

The Conservatory Garden, 104th Street & Fifth Avenue

Prior to 1983, this garden's overgrown hedges, broken bottles and graffiti made it seem sinister and isolated. Since its restoration, it has become a source of pride to its East Harlem neighbors, a place of peace for patients and staff from two nearby hospitals and a world-renown tourist attraction.

The GreenHouse Project, Rikers Island Correctional Facility

The GreenHouse Project addresses recidivism through skill training in garden design and horticulture. Participants are assigned to post-release paid internships that can lead to permanent careers in horticulture, often with the New York City Parks Department.

The Labyrinth of Contemplation, Battery Park

Commissioned for the first anniversary of 9/11, the labyrinth and its surroundings generate peace and promote conflict resolution.



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The Gardeners

Aresh Javadi

An Iranian-born puppeteer and garden activist, Javadi founded the group, More Gardens, which works to preserve community gardens in the South Bronx.

“What oil is to the Middle East, real estate development is to New York”

Abu Talib

Originally from the rural South and a convert to Islam, Talib has transformed his community, which deeply respects the Taqwa Farm — keeping it crime and violence-free.

People are drawn to the garden...looking for peace of mind. (Abu Talib)

Norman Clayton

A former construction worker, who has struggled with mental illness his whole life, Clayton has taken on the responsibility for watering of The Cabbage Patch in Times Square. He also now has his own poetry blog.

The garden wouldn't have survived without his dedication. It's changed him...

Horticultural therapist in charge of program

Lynden Miller

A collage artist and renovator of the Conservatory Garden, Miller has since been hired to renovate Bryant Park, Central Park Children's Zoo and Robert Wagner Park in Battery Park City.

James Jiler, Marisol Ortiz, Carolyn Domingo and “Fudgie” Morales

Formerly a Peace Corps volunteer, Jiler created the GreenHouse Project. Marisol Ortiz and Carolyn Domingo, both drug abusers, formed a friendship while restoring a neglected herb garden on Rikers Island. “Fudgie” Morales was an addict who also worked in the program. Over a year after their release, continuing working in the program.

Being in nature takes away my anger. (Marisol Ortiz)

The positive results of my work have helped me grow spiritually. (Carolyn Domingo)

Madison Square Park is my “healing garden.” (Morales on where she works full-time)

Arianne Burgess

Runs Camino de Paz, which creates labyrinths as a form of conflict resolution; designer of the labyrinth at Battery Park.



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Director's Statement

After 12 years of making films about lives that were devastated by genocide and injustice, I wanted to understand more about the heart's capacity to mend.

To that end, I visited centers, both in the United States and in Denmark, whose purpose is the rehabilitation of victims of political torture. It was during my research that I was introduced to the therapeutic use of gardens and green spaces.

The co-production for that project fell through, but intrigued and inspired by the stories I'd heard, I wondered if any therapeutic gardens existed in New York.

I spent six months exploring the streets of a city I thought I knew — meeting extraordinary people along the way. I learned how a cared-for garden can be a nurturing refuge, a platform for social change and an opportunity to develop new skills and new attitudes. I found stories of community building, refuge, hidden potential and the inner journey to peace of mind.

Gardens are not just about horticulture. They are small democracies that inspire patience, responsibility, nurturing potential, socializing, sharing information and developing goals. As one horticultural therapist says: "It's not about the plants, it's about the people."

Trying to imagine New York without these oases conjures up a vision of a city with an even more fragmented and isolated population.

My goal in making *The Healing Gardens of New York* has been to raise awareness about the value of community gardens and to encourage the public to protect their future.

Alexandra Isles



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Director/Producer/Writer

Alexandra Isles is a New York-based documentary filmmaker, whose work reflects her deep commitment to human rights and dignity. *The Healing Gardens of New York* is her fourth film.

Isles has produced and directed three documentaries.

Porraimos: Europe's Gypsies in Holocaust premiered at the US Holocaust Museum and was televised on Thirteen/WNET. It has appeared in film festivals around the world including the Human Rights Watch Film Festival (New York) and Margaret Mead Film Festival. In its review, the *New York Times* described *Porraimos* as adding "another whole layer to the evil of the Holocaust"

Scandalize My Name: Stories from the Blacklist, the first documentary for BET Movies — introduced by Morgan Freeman and featuring Harry Belafonte — has been screened around the country at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival (New York), Chicago International Film Festival and Hot Springs Documentary Film Festival (Hot Springs, Arkansas). It received the Certificate of Merit at the Chicago International Film Festival. It has been shown at Yale University, the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and televised on PBS.

Her first film, ***The Power of Conscience: The Danish Resistance and Rescue of the Jews*** premiered at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and was shown as part of the Museum of Modern Art's *What's New* series. It has been broadcast nationally and internationally and is part of the permanent collections of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (Washington, D.C.), the Museum of Jewish Heritage [Jewish Museum] (New York) and Yad Vashem (Jerusalem).

Isles' films have received grant support from the both public and private sectors, including the New York Council for the Humanities, National Endowment of for the Humanities (NEH), New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA) and Vincent Astor Foundation.



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The Creative Team

Douglas Rossini, Editor

Douglas Rossini has edited a wide-range of documentaries. His credits include *A Model for Matisse*, *Porraimos: Europe's Gypsies in the Holocaust*, *Scandalize My Name: Stories from the Blacklist* and *First Peron Singular: I.M. Pei*.

Paul Koestner, Director of Photography

Paul Koestner has been director of photography on *Love Letters to New York*, *Big Help*, *A Chance to Grow* and *Scandalize My Name: Stories from the Blacklist*.

Jed Feuer, Composer

Jed Feuer has composed for the concert stage, theatre and film. He wrote scores for *Reactions*, *21 Songs*, *The Scoundrel D* and *The Bing Bang*. He also served as musical consultant for *The Power of Conscience: The Danish Resistance and Rescue of the Jews*.

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