

The City Garden, HOUSTON, TEXAS



“Gardening makes me forget all my troubles. No matter where it is located, a garden can bear fruit through a labor of love by so many caring people.”

—MINNIE AGUILAR,
Public Works and Engineering, City of Houston, Texas,
and novice gardener

For years, the only thing outside the Bob Lanier Public Works Building in Houston, Texas, was concrete. That changed in June 2010, when landscape architect Keiji Asakura, Urban Harvest director Mark Bowen, and Laura Spanjian, Houston’s director of sustainability, joined together to establish a container garden in the heart of the city’s downtown. Within three weeks, Houston’s Parks Department had donated thirty-four planting containers; Keep Houston Beautiful had offered up soil and tools; and local nurseries had donated plants, such as okra, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, and squash—which thrive in the heavy summer heat. When planting day arrived, about two hundred people, including Mayor Annise Parker, showed up to help dig in the dirt. Today, seventy-five people who work in the Bob Lanier building devote time to maintaining this garden. Tambri Elkins is one of those employees.

“By nature and by nurture I am a gardener. I didn’t know about this

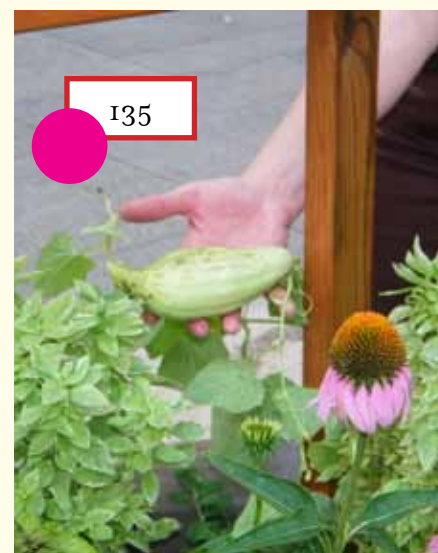


project; I literally stumbled onto the containers and the soil and the plants as I was leaving the building for a lunch date. I looked around and canceled my lunch. It was so forward thinking for our city, and it fit my philosophy of ‘If you are going to grow something, make sure your time is spent on plants that give you something back.’ But this

garden offered more. The ability to de-stress during the day, to unwind with the sun on my back and my hands in the earth, to smell wet soil, and to feel the texture of each plant on my fingertips was too tantalizing to ignore. And I could be out there in the blazing Houston sun with like-minded individuals. How could I say no? The

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A concrete landscape is transformed by simple containers growing bountiful plants; each cared for by volunteers from a single floor of an office building.



garden’s organization also appealed to me. Each floor of the Lanier building had adopted a container; we picked a coordinator for the floor and found volunteers to plant and tend and water what was grown. We paired enthusiastic novice gardeners with more experienced ones, so there could be teaching and learning.

“I grew up in Southern California at a time when it was all strawberry fields, artichoke plants, avocado trees, concord grapes, and citrus farming. Everyone had gardens and small orchards that were places to play, dream, and explore. At night, my family sat around the kitchen table looking at seed catalogs, heatedly discussing what to plant. As a child, gardens gave me shade, limbs to climb up to the sky, even green apples to entice a few horses that in my imagination carried me to faraway lands. The sap from fig trees, which



works like itching powder, was pay-back to siblings. I remember picking small, red tomatoes, heated from the sun, and popping them in my mouth to quench my thirst. I remember sitting under the fruit trees staring at all the neat garden rows, watching for the first sign of life, dreading all the weeds that had to be pulled, and waiting for the exact day when a fruit or vegetable was at its peak for picking. All these memories come back to me in our small, urban container garden.

“Our city garden is a lesson that anyone can grow food with a minimal amount of space, time, money, and energy. In these containers, we produce not only sustenance but also pride and confidence. The gardeners meet people who work in the same building, who we may have passed for years in hallways, but we never knew their names. And whenever I’m in the garden, someone always walks by and asks, ‘What are you growing?’ ”

—TAMBRI ELKINS

“To me, gardens are small reminders of all the wonders of the universe.”

—TAMBRI ELKINS,
Senior Human Resources Specialist, City
of Houston, and veteran gardener